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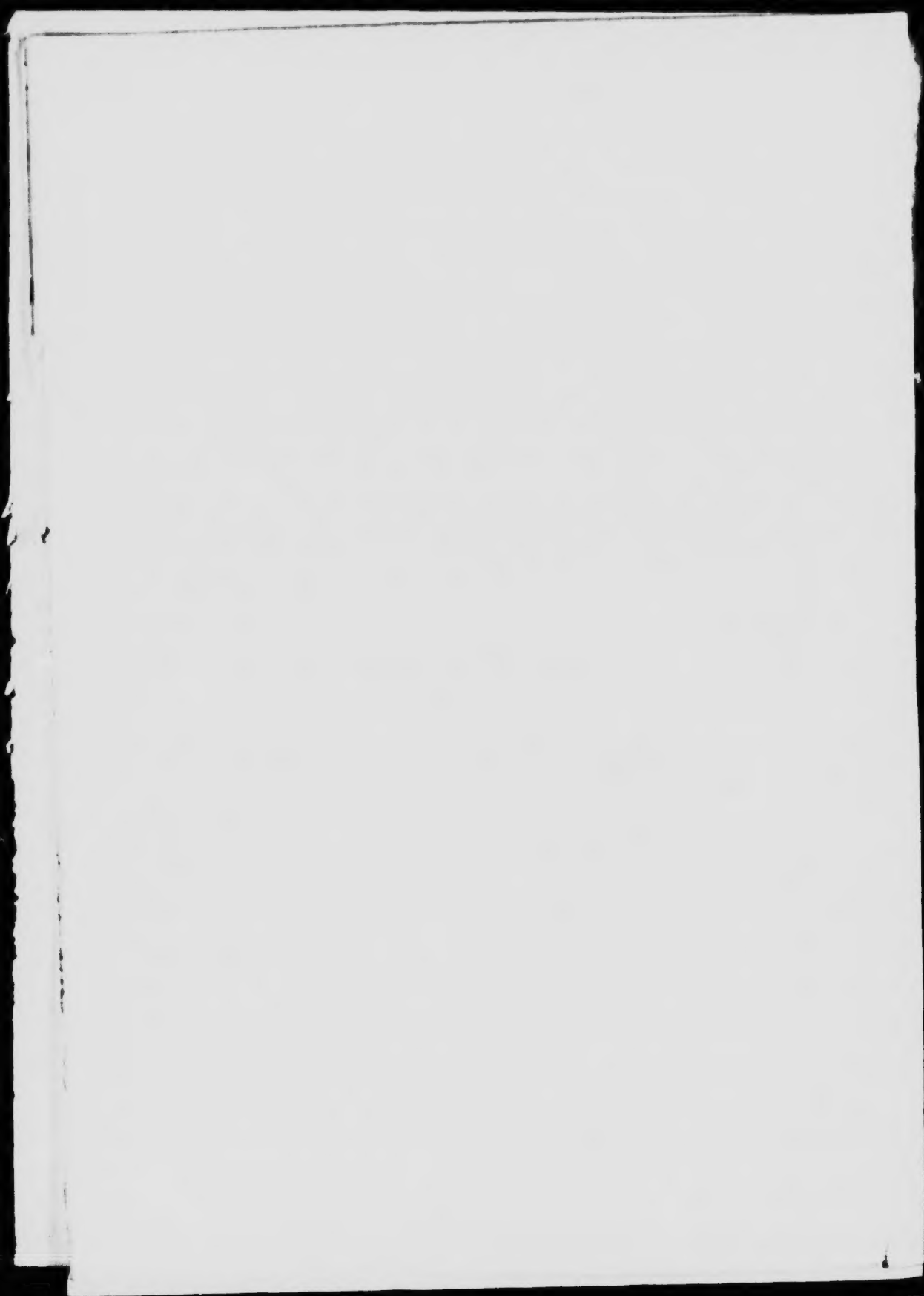
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THE PROWLERS





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THE PROWLERS

BY

F. ST. MARS

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F. ST. MARS.

THE PROWLERS

WATCHERS OF THE NIGHT



PEACE, brother. What of the night?" Rufus, the crafty old dog-fox, turned in the couch he had made for himself among the reeds to ambuscade the water-rats, and stared at the running oiliness of the stream. A broad, flattish, grey head rose to the surface, without sound, and regarded him with the keenest pair of eyes you ever saw. It was Unrest, the old grey otter.

"Peace?" growled Rufus, sitting up and scratching one ear. "There is no peace here. The Man-thing who has bought this land as far as you can see is shooting mad. He allows no hounds to hunt; and if you are not a pheasant or a partridge, or a hare, you had better go and drown yourself. The place crawls with keepers, who are told to kill everything but game—even rabbits are getting scarce. Time was when foxes were honoured, but now—— Mind where you land, brother. There's a trap there."

"Twist my whiskers!" exclaimed Unrest, shooting backwards like a lobster. "That's the fifth to-night. And water-bailiffs? I've seen

four since sundown, all with lightning sticks (that was his name for guns), all on the watch for us night folk. Salmon, trout, and grayling, they alone have a good time in these waters. Is thy Man-thing fishing-mad also, Rufus? Only fish may live here."

"Maybe," the fox answered, yawning hugely. "I would go away, but whither can a hunter go these days? All hands are against him."

"Come to the cliffs. There is a sanctuary there where no animal of any kind may be killed. It is the order of the rich man who owns the place, and loves the wild people and allows them to live," said Unrest. "None can follow thee there."

"Am I a seal?" snarled the fox disgustedly.

"But there is the upper-cliff," Unrest returned, diving playfully at his own reflection in the moonlit water. "I hear there is safe hiding and good hunting there. Though I live along the under-cliff."

"How can one get to this wood?" the fox asked, pricking his sharp ears.

"It is no wood," Unrest snorted contemptuously. "It is rock—rock where no man may come, O thou flea-bitten land-crawler. Listen now: Take twenty miles down-stream to the sea, then turn and swim along the coast for twelve miles south, then——"

"Oh, tickle my brush!" Rufus broke in.

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"We're not all web-footed wave-hoppers. I cannot do this thing. Is there no land way?"

"There is," said the otter slowly. "It is over the mountains yonder, if thou canst——"

"But there is no foothold," Rufus, who was excitable and impatient like all the dog tribe, interrupted. "My son has tried, and so has Brocky, the badger. And Royal, the stag, told me only this morning there is no way over."

"I say there *is* a way," went on Unrest, more quietly still. He had been floating lower and lower down-stream for some seconds, gazing uneasily towards the woods. "But only Muffle Wing, the brown-white owl, knows it. . . . Phew! What stench comes this way?"

"Faugh!" gasped Rufus, thrusting his nose up into the wind. "It is Foumart, the polecat. He always smells like carrion on a hot day."

Next moment a long, low, undulating black-brown beast, built much on the lines of a large brown ferret, but with a diabolically cruel face, and a smell that was appalling, came bursting out of the night. When it caught sight of Rufus it shied, and blundered down the bank into the water, for there is no love lost 'twixt fox and polecat.

"Man comes!" it chattered over its shoulder, breasting the current and vanishing up-stream.

Instantly, without a sound, Unrest sank like a stone, and Rufus melted into the shadows, slinking away, sinuous and snake-like, into the

woods. And the keeper who came creeping along the stream bank a minute later never knew what had happened.

The wood was quickly left behind, and Rufus galloped out into the open country, where the night wind sung in his ears, and his shadow danced a grotesque, mad dance before him as he fled through the moon-haze. Then, just as he was rounding the bend of a hedge, lying over almost on one side to take the turn at full speed, he suddenly threw himself back on his haunches, and stopped dead, his straightened paws slithering in the red goodness of the ploughed soil. Before him stood two figures, "frozen" in their places at his sudden advent. One was the lean, rakish form of a vixen; the other, the bolder outline of a fine dog-fox. The latter, in his ignorance, said:

"What cub comes here?"

"Such an one as—this!!!" snarled Rufus.

And at the last word he hurled himself forward, a red streak through the haze. A startled yap, a scuffle, a worrying, snarling scurry, and—the frantic pattering of the other's pads as he fled up the hedge without shame, and for his life. This, literally, was all that a watcher, had there been one, could have taken in of the fight, so quick and furious and short-lived was it.

In a minute Rufus came back from chasing his rival, his tongue lolling, and grinning cunningly as only a fox can. Then he sat down, and, lifting

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up his head, sent forth a challenge—a dismal yapping bark ending in a gurgle, a sound full of loneliness, and appeal, and unutterable sadness. But none answered that challenge.

"Well beaten," said the vixen, looking him over admiringly. "Thou art well grov'n, too. Of an age to have sure cunning in the hunt, I see. Wilt come and lair with me?"

"My fangs and my sides are red in thy service," he replied gruffly. "Seek now some quarry and I will show thee how to kill. Henceforth your trail shall be my trail."

"Good!" she snapped. "It shall be as thou sayest. I mind me of a place where rabbits feed—if the keepers have not frightened them."

So they trotted off together, till they came to a certain hedge, and Rufus, peeping through into the field beyond, flattened suddenly on to the earth.

"G-r-r!" he said. "There be thy rabbits."

The vixen peered, and saw a big bare field, peopled by squat forms running about in the moonlight.

"They are clean out in the open, and there is no cover for a stalk at all," she snarled, lifting her thin upper lip wickedly. "What now?"

Rufus scratched one ear thoughtfully, and threw up his head, testing the wind. Then, after a few minutes, he turned and looked at her with his oblique yellow eyes shining as dewdrops shine in the morn.

"Wait here, little one," he whispered. "Thou shalt have the kill. Only, lie close as a snake, and I will drive these rabbits as a dog drives sheep. I have a plan." And he went away into the night on his stomach.

Rufus followed the edge of that field round till he crouched hidden exactly opposite his new mate on the other side, the rabbits scattered at feed between them.

"Now," he muttered, "I will roll a little in play." And, creeping out into the open, he began to roll backwards and forwards exactly as a dog will.

The nearest rabbits to him jerked up their heads, spun round like tops, and prepared to bolt, but seeing that he was only having a playful roll they stayed and watched, for they had more than once seen foxes do that before. After a bit they got tired of watching (which is just like the silliness of rabbits and sheep) and dropped their heads to feed, for they had no fear of the fox so long as he rolled openly before them. This was a pity so far as the rabbits were concerned, because for every roll Rufus took towards the hedge he took two out into the field towards the rabbits, till at last he was close enough to the nearest one to make a—a— He gave one mighty bound forward, followed by a lightning-flash dive. There was a scurry, a snap, a single little death-squeal of a rabbit, and Rufus was standing—red-jawed and excited

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—above a dead bunny, whilst the white tails of the others were scuttling madly over to the opposite hedge, clean into the jaws of the hidden vixen, who interviewed one of them to no small purpose.

One day, about a month later, Rufus and his mate lay curled up like dogs in their den, when there came a terrible happening. It descended without any warning at all, that calamity, and the beginning of it was a jarring muffled thud, which removed Rufus straight from deep sleep to the other end of the den in one bound. His mate shot up a tunnel to the emergency-exit like a flash, and like a flash shot back again.

“Stopped!” she snarled between her bared teeth, her eyes aflame in the darkness like little green lamps. “And—and this is the end, I suppose!”

The blows continued up above, pounding and echoing in the earthy ways, and by the same token Rufus knew that a party of keepers had come to dig his mate and himself out to a death they could not see—like rats. Yet he never lost his nerve, never for one instant dropped his craftiness. As the tunnels shook, and earth pattered—pattered down from the roof at each blow, and the hot, dead air filled with the un-nice, pungent stench peculiar to foxes when they are upset, old Rufus was ready to snap at any chance, to play off any dodge. And their chance came.

Quite suddenly, at the end of half an hour of purgatory, when the red outlaws lay watching death approach inch by hard-won inch, half of the roof caved in, almost burying Rufus, who was huddled beneath it. The head keeper, seeing something beneath the tumbled earth, reached for his gun, and, pushing it down the hole, fired. Instantly the place was shaken with a clap like thunder, and both foxes almost died of heart-failure on the spot. Rufus, however, had edged and wriggled, and squirmed his body quite six inches through the débris, while the keeper was reaching for his gun, and the tearing leaden death only caught part of that pride of his life, his brush. Then Rufus, lying still as anything—a wild creature's last resource—felt a hand feeling through the earth till it seized him, and hauled him out to the light of day. Now, any other animal but a fox—or a dingo—would have struggled crazily, but Rufus just hung in the grasp of the hated slayer, hung so limply, with shut eyes, legs that flopped pathetically all ways, and head that banged anyhow any way, that the man thought he had indeed killed him when he fired that shot, and flung him down. Rufus rolled over and over, all floppy and loose, just like a dead thing—three times from the force with which he was thrown, and with the third roll he rolled up on to his feet, and—pff! There was no more Rufus. A single bound had taken him into a briar-patch, and the rest was crawling

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belly-flat and crazy-eyed, racing off when he thought himself out of range. But there *was* a shot, and a shout, and—oh, horrors! a pitiful little agonised yap; and Rufus knew, as he plunged blindly through the golden shower of sunshine in the glare of the wide-eyed day, that his wife had met her fate at the lair's mouth. Then I think he went mad. At least, a shepherd speaks of a red-eyed fox, which ran blindly through his flock at full noon—and none but a mad fox would be there at noon—snarling and snapping as he ran; and the large-eyed hares tell a tale, even to this day, of a foaming fox, which came streaking over the uplands—stark red in the yellow glare—which refused to turn aside for an adder lying in its path, evidently awakened out of its winter sleep to take a sun-bath (all wild creatures save the hedgehog turn aside for the adder), and how the adder was so amazed that it forgot to strike till it was too late.

Be all these seeings and sayings as they may, certain it is that Rufus knew nothing, and remembered less, till he awoke, twenty-four hours later, inside a disused badger's "set" in the heart of a pine-wood, far up on the mountain's flank. For a long time he lay and blinked at the fevered glow of the setting sun, trellised by the pine-boughs above on the ground at the mouth of his abode. Very bitter was he, and the thoughts surging through his brain were blood-red as the dying orb of day then sinking

in the west. Then a desire seized him ; perhaps it originated in fear. I don't know. Anyway the desire was for the cliff-home of which Unrest, the old grey otter, had told him thirty sundowns ago.

Rufus sat up and nosed himself all over to make sure no parts were broken. Then he stretched, for it is good and healthy to stretch.

"Unrest said that only the brown-white owl knew the way over the mountain," he growled to himself. "Now, what did he mean by that? Whoever heard of a brown-white owl? There is only one person who might know—Noctule, the bat. I will go find him."

So Rufus hunted about till he found a cave, and discovered Noctule, the big bat that hawks high across the summer sky, who is swift of flight, and little known. But Noctule was still in his winter sleep, and it was not till he felt the warmth from the fox's breath, after that beast had been sitting gazing up at him for some time, that he moved slightly.

"Where lives Muffle Wing, the brown-white owl?" cried Rufus as loudly as he could.

The bat shifted further, and others, hung about the roof of the cave, shifted also, with a dry rustling, such as dead leaves make, and a hard scratching of claws.

"Go away, cunning one," piped the bat. "I am beyond thy leap by two wing-spans, as I was careful to measure before I hung up."

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Now the voice of a bat is so fine and small that many human beings cannot hear it; but Rufus could hear even the breathing of the trees, which is a smaller sound still, and which only men with the quickest ears, after long years of training, can detect.

"I seek no kill to-night," grinned the fox, "or I would have had thee off thy hanging-place in the snap of a jaw, leather wing. I seek only Muffle Wing, the brown-white owl."

"The brown *barn* owl," squeaked Noctule.

Barn owl, be it said, is only another name for white owl, who is dead-white save for his back, which is light-brown; his face, breast, under parts, and even his feathered legs, are white.

"There is such a one as thou namest," began the bat. "But because he is rarest of all owls, and therefore much hunted by man, he lives in secret places in the mountain. Go, thou, to the Wolf Fang rock in the 'dead hour,' and maybe, if ye be very still, ye may see him. Go. I sleep." And he did instantly.

It took Rufus the best part of that night to find that place. At last, however, in the darkest, coldest, most desolate, most creepy part of the night, when all life is at its lowest ebb, the hour before dawn, the "dead hour," as the wild folk call it, he came upon the Wolf Fang rock. There was a little moon, casting a tantalising cold light, in which Rufus beheld a jagged tooth of rock, a spike as it were, thirty feet high, striking

in from the side of a rugged and riven ravine. This he knew must be his goal, and he glided on his stomach up to a heather-patch within twenty feet of it, and subsided into invisibility.

Scarcely had he crouched long enough to understand the sights and little rustling creeping sounds of the place—that is to say, about ten minutes—than, quite suddenly, he stiffened from head to foot. Something somewhere had snored; and it is a startling thing in such a place to hear a snore.

A pause, then a long-drawn, venomous, reptilian hiss, followed almost instantly by screech after screech of horrible goblin-like cries. Then Rufus, glancing at the Wolf Fang rock, "froze." A thing, an upright thing with huge, gleaming eyes, sat on the knife-edged top thereof. He had not seen the coming of that thing, and even his quick ears had gathered no sound. It was just there, and the sepulchral complaints emanated from it. In fact, it was Muffle Wing himself.

"Peace, brother," cried Rufus. "I crave a boon of thee."

But the owl said nothing at first. He merely rolled his fiery, cat-like orbs round upon the fox, and stared through the night.

"Peace, red one," he replied at last, in a hollow, coughing voice that seemed to suggest caves and ruined places. "What of the night?"

This was the word—the password—of all the night watchers.

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"This," whimpered Rufus. "The country is no longer a good hunting-ground. I have lost mine—my mate—I have nothing now left. None of us have anything left. We are being killed like sheep, that the pheasants may live and grow abundant. Unrest, the grey otter, speaks of the cliffs where is good hunting for all the watchers of the night, and it is said that none know the way over the mountain to the cliff save thee, and I come to ask that way of thee. If the matter of three pheasants freshly killed, or three pullets taken newly off the perch, be of any account in payment, they are thine."

The owl blinked twice, and snored a long-drawn snore. Then:

"Keep thy pullets!" he shrieked suddenly, so suddenly that Rufus jumped. "It is the secret of my hiding-place thou wouldst have. But next sundown I go away also, and the secret would have gone with me. Thou wert nearly too late, brother. By my beak and claws, I have a mind to show thee, if thou canst follow. Many have tried before, but all have failed to follow me when I lead the way. Come!"

The last word ended in an awful prolonged scream; and then, silently as a ghost, the night bird unfurled his huge wings and flapped away into darkness. Rufus sprang off with a sharp yap and cantered after the noiseless form slipping in and out among the trees in the deep gloom in front. He kept one eye upon the owl, and one

ahead, but he knew not these woodland ways, and he was by no means comfortable in his mind.

Once he leapt a fallen pine-trunk, and, twisting eel-like in mid-spring, returned upon himself, so to speak, and landed in a heap almost where he had started from. That was because he had discovered a trap on the other side of the felled tree *after* he sprang. Once, also, he stumbled over something soft, which swore and spat worse than any cat. It was a weasel; but he had no time to stop and abolish it for snapping at his leg, as the owl kept right on without saying anything.

"My whiskers!" exclaimed Rufus. "Won't Muffle Wing ever stop?"

But Muffle Wing had apparently forgotten all about his follower, and sailed away snoring into the night on his great wings, which flapped and flapped and made no sound. The trees thinned out and stopped; the sides of the ravine rose up sheer, so that they seemed about to fall inwards, so steep were they; and a little mountain stream (which argued and sang and chattered all to itself) came and kept them company somewhere in the darkness. Then the moon, which had been threatening to vanish for some time, ducked behind a ridge and left the world enveloped in an inky pall. Rufus dived through narrow alleys between huge boulders, stumbled and sprawled on stones which slid continually

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beneath his feet, climbed up places steep as a house-roof, and slid down the other side on his tail; almost ran into things which scuttled away into the night muttering; and saw (that was when he passed the den of Fiend, the last of the wild cats) huge and fiery eyes glaring at him from some pit-like cave-mouth—all of which showed him why the other wild folk had said there was no way, and Muffle Wing had told him to follow *if* he could.

Suddenly the breast of the mountain flung right up into the black night before him, and the stream ducked into a hole in a rock because its way was otherwise barred. And into that hole (it was but four feet high) flapped Muffle Wing. Rufus stopped dead; he did not like going in there. But in a few seconds he remembered that to go back alone was almost worse, so he set back his ears, and, sitting upon his haunches, gave a call, thus:

"O watchers of the night! I go to find the cliff-land. Follow ye who dare! Yap—yap—yah—o—o!"

Then he turned, and, with bared fangs, dived after Muffle Wing into the darkness. And he never returned.

Now, it is impossible for anyone or anything to move, however silently, through the wild at night without being watched. He may not see the watchers (most probably he does not even guess at their existence), but a hundred pairs of

hidden, furtive eyes are regarding him, are marking his trail. However softly he may steal, there are those that hear and steal softer; however cunningly he may lie hidden, there are those that watch and lie stiller.

Have you ever sat at the edge of a wood at night, sat without moving for perhaps half an hour? If so, you must have heard surreptitious rustlings; strange, furtive noises of live things which glide about all the time, and which you never see. Those are some of the watchers of the night, and they keep passing to and fro all through the dark hours.

Rufus must have known this, for his trail, already marked by a few, was now marked by many. His lonely, short bark had cut a long way into the stillness, and more than one night prowler turned from its quest to find out what was troubling the fox.

So it happened that within five minutes of the fox's disappearance a stoat (who belongs to the most inquisitive tribe of the night hunters, the weasel tribe) must needs come out with her train of two-thirds-grown young. She led them, like a pack of tiny hounds, straight up the slope, and fearlessly into the black cave (stoats have no fear), hot on the trail of the fox; and they never returned.

In a little while a pair of polecats (also of the weasel tribe), who had heard Rufus's call a quarter of a mile away, came bounding up the

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slope, following his scent. Like the stoats, the polecats have no knowledge of fear, and these two went into the forbidding cave unhesitatingly. Nor did they reappear again. A few minutes passed after that, and then a pair of badgers, looking like miniature bears in the gloom, came shuffling down from a gully. They caught the scent of the others, snuffled at it, became inquisitive, and followed, grunting; they, too, never came back.

There was a pause after that, during which dawn awoke and stalked over the mountains, shedding a grey light in its wake, and driving the dawn-wind before it. Then, last of all, running on three legs (hop, hop, hopity, hop) came a red little, lean little figure, panting and stumbling up the ravine. It was the vixen, and she was following her husband's trail. When the keeper had turned in amaze at Rufus's sudden vanishment, as you will remember, when he was thrown aside for dead, she had made a bolt for it, and he had only been able to get a snapshot at her, wounding her in the leg. So she had got clean away. Into the cave she went, fearing not to follow where her lord led the way. She was the last; and she also never returned.

Meanwhile, Rufus, loping after the big owl, found himself, after a few yards of the hole, in a place, a cavern—vast, echoing, and damp. This he knew by the sound, and the smell, and the feel, for even he could scarcely see in this well-

■

like darkness. The stream roared hollowly for some time, and then ceased abruptly. It must have ducked off somewhere else on its own account. Muffle Wing came down, and flew just above the fox's head to avoid the stalactites which hung from the unseen roof, very, very high overhead; and in the silence, after the stream had gone, Rufus could hear the steady, hollow drip, drip of water all about. He slid at every stride on damp, grey ooze, and the fur on his red sides and back was drenched with the moisture that hung in the air.

Their progress was slow now, and careful. Even Muffle Wing had to pick his way, and more than once flung to right or left, seeking apparently a landmark.

"By my brush and mask, listen!" snapped Rufus suddenly, after half an hour of this blind feeling through the dead stillness.

Far, far behind grew a whisper, which became a murmur, which turned to a rumble which burst into a roar that sucked up the silence and filled the stagnant air. Muffle Wing gave one startled screech, and his wings began to winnow the air in frantic haste.

"Hurry, Rufus! hurry!" he hissed. "It is a landslide. The mountain tumbles in. The roof falls. Hurry! Oh, hurry!" And Rufus could hear the frantic snapping of the great bird's beak as he slid and slithered and panted and tore his way through the blackness in the owl's wake.

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The air was filled with one terrific, growing, heaving, sliding volume of sound—indescribable and awful ; also it was filled with dust and motes which rose and hung like fog. It seemed as if the mountain was in torment ; as if the very bowels of the earth were caving in ; and the rending, thundering of tons upon tons of falling rock was appalling.

At last—was it after weeks or minutes ? Rufus never knew—a grey gleam grew up ahead. Dawn ! The day ! One last effort. One final mad rush through the choking inferno, and the two were out of it. Into the open from the mouth of a cave shot they, down a little slope to a small stream, beyond which rolled and undulated the bare, wind-whipped expanse of a vast moor. To the north and to the west they could see the sea-cliffs, and hear the beating roar of the ocean. Here they flung themselves panting among the heather, knowing—by instinct, I suppose—that they were safe.

“ By my flight-feathers, that was a near thing,” chuckled Muffle Wing at last, sitting up and blinking in the new-born light which worried him. He was a rich golden-brownish hue, and shone all over like burnished copper. Then he danced up and down on his razor-edge talons and hissed aloud : “ Look ! oh, look ! ”

Rufus did look, and blinked in astonishment ; for out of the thundering blackness of the cave pelted the stoat and her pack of young ones. They

dived for cover at sight of the two, till Rufus barked :

"A truce! a truce, O Varey! In times of common danger all the wild holds a truce!"

And the little animals stopped on the word. It was true talk, for in flood, or fire, or drought all the wild folk hold a truce and assemble together as if they had never hunted one another at all. This is one of the laws of the wild, and the stoats knew it.

Suddenly there was another scuffle; and next moment the two polecats were hurled out of the darkness, and came sprawling down the slope, spluttering and swearing shamefully.

"Truce!" they jabbered, picking themselves out of the heather and peering round, their diabolical little faces working with rage and fright. "Does the mountain fall? Ye called 'Follow who dare,' and—and we are no cowards, so we followed."

But before Rufus could answer there came maniacal chatterings and ravings from that same cave, and out bounced the two badgers, smothered from head to heel in grey dust and slime, and very angry and upset indeed. But they had no time to speak, only to fall anyhow down to the stream, for all the watchers yelled and jumped together.

There was one monumental, shaking, blasting roar from the depths of the mountain. Out belched a shower of stones, and dust, and slime,

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and a hissing wind driven forth by the falling earth, and there, right in the middle of it all, just as a shell is fired from a cannon's mouth, shot the little, red, bristling, terrified form of the vixen. Next moment the mouth of the cave shut down—collapsed exactly like a cardboard box that has been trodden upon—and the vixen rolled head over heels down to her stupefied husband.

Nothing moved, none breathed even so much as a whisper; they only stared and stared with eyes that threatened to burst from their heads, at what had been the mouth of the cave, and was now pounded, compressed, almost solid, earth and rock.

What had happened was that the roof and walls of the cavern, made rotten by the continual percolation of water, had simply caved in and filled the place up. It was nothing much to the mountain, this filling up of one cavern, but it meant a great deal to the creatures that happened to be passing through it at the time.

The vixen picked herself up and shook her trim little form, not quite certain if she were in fifty pieces or one.

"Peace, O watchers of the night," said a whistling voice all of a sudden from nowhere special, as a wise old grey old head shot up out of the stream. "I am Unrest, the otter. Welcome to the sanctuary, O Rufus. Thou seest, there *was* a way, as I said."

Rufus cocked one ear and licked his lean lips

thoughtfully as he looked at where the cave had been.

"Peace, brother," he answered. "There *was* a way, as thou sayest."

And thus did Rufus, the fox, lead the watchers of the night out of the land of persecution into the sanctuary where all the wild folk were protected by order of the owner. And if you were to go there in the early morning—after the badgers have come home to their new den for the day—you might, perhaps, see first the vixen and her cubs, and last of all Rufus himself, returning to their lair among the cliffs after a night's hunting.

Below, above the roar of the surf, you may hear the hunting-whistle of Unrest, the otter, and from a little cave half-way up the cliff the answering screech of Muffle Wing, the only brown-white owl in the country. They are all there, or thereabouts—those Watchers of the Night.

THE TERROR OF THE "FLIT"

"Sullen, sloven, savage, secret, uncontrolled
Laying on a new land evil of the old."

—RUDYARD KIPLING.

HE trouble began when the stream was diverted by some engineers from its course over bleak and barren downs, where it was not wanted, in another direction to a town in a valley, where it was. Now, along the original course of the stream stood three barns, such as the monks built in the old days for the storing of their corn, into which you could put any two—or three—mere ordinary barns. In these barns the farmers who lived away in the valley below stored the downland corn for the winter. For the most part, however, they were deserted of man, towering islands of civilisation on the frowning ramps of the downs.

But the barns really belonged to the rats. It was the only shelter the rats of those inhospitable rolling wastes possessed; and they swarmed therein as—well, as flies swarm in a pastrycook's towards the end of a hot summer, and that is very swarmy indeed. Now, rats have a peculiarity—they have many, but this is an extra special one—inasmuch as they cannot at the outside live

more than thirty-six hours without a drink. They are the most thirsty of all the wild folk; and what they will not do for water has yet to be discovered. Therefore, when the stream was diverted from its course the trouble began.

Then, having nothing to drink, those rats "flitted," and the "flitting" of rats is not a small matter. They just removed one moonlight night from those three barns, every whiskered one of them; and in the morning they were no more. They had gone in their thousands, leaving the barns to their own dark hollow silence, to the spiders and the beetles, the few skirmishing mice, and the bats that hung in rows, like tiny dark hams, among the rafters.

There was a wood not many miles away which boasted a small streamlet, and pheasants; especially pheasants. Thither went the rats. They poured into it, in I dare not tell you what numbers, because it was the only place left in that barren land that offered at once shelter and water. In a week the keeper wondered if the wood had ever boasted anything at all save rats. All else quickly began to vanish into space.

Healthy broods of young pheasants were tucked in to sleep by their mothers on an evening, and on a morning they had gone. Partridge chicks, straying from their mother's side among long grass in the fields adjoining the wood, faded into thin air; young, fat little bunny rabbits

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which went for a walk in the moonlight strolled apparently into spookland; blackbirds, roosting in a bush, were at sunset, and at dawn they were not; and there were ugly bites—not self-inflicted—upon several full-grown rabbits who had ventured into some deserted burrows at night-time. And behind it all, at the back of the trouble—as they always are—stood the rats. Yet you never saw a rat; only the moon did that.

One night about a week later a thing, looking like a snake in the gloom, moved swiftly across the last field bordering on the wood. And as it came it was noticeable that the feeding rabbits melted before it like smoke, and the peewits flapped hastily off into the night sky after the fashion of vanishing spooks. It was not a snake, but a line of little, long, low beasts following one another in Indian file, with odd, sidelong leaps. To be exact it was old Varey—pronounced Verey—the stoat, his wife, and his seven three-parts-grown young.

He had come post-haste from the corpse of a partridge he had slain and left scarcely touched for all the world to see and blame him for, because Noctule, the big, high-flying bat, had carried him word that there was a plague of rats in the wood. And, had he only known it, he had just come in time; for the keeper, unable to cope with the vermin, saw visions of being sacked. The stoat, be it said, is the rat's pet horror bar one, the rat "bogey-man," as it were; the mere

mention of whose name scares the baby ratlings into a semi-fit.

"Steady, brother, steady," squeaked Noctule, stooping suddenly at a big, droning beetle. "They are as leaves on the ground in autumn. Art not afraid?"

"A stoat is never afraid," came the short, yapping reply in chorus, which was true, for the stoat's courage is as big as he is little, and is above proof. "Thou spokest of rats not a few, brother, I think. There will be a great killing forward. Where be these naked-tailed, slab-toothed vermin?"

"Listen!" the bat squeaked by way of answer.

And they stopped dead—all of a heap—on the edge of the wood to listen. Then there grew into the blanketing darkness and the quietness a sound, and the sound was like the rising of the tide over dry sand. It was the pattering of rats' feet and the rustling of rats' bodies under the trees. There was nothing nice about the sound. It was revolting, and in a miniature way affected the nerves, as the far-away hum of a mob does. Nor was it made pleasanter by the occasional squawk of a bird slain in the dark on her very nest, or the attenuated baby-like scream of a young rabbit surrounded and pulled down in the gloom.

Varey's eyes grew red in his small, keen, wedge-shaped head, as he listened; for, although so small, he was a very terrible person indeed in

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the wild, being one of the few creatures who killed for fun.

"Now, children," he whispered, "silent and swift is the word, and keep together."

There was a pause as the stoats dived into the treble blackness under the trees. Then :

"There is killing! There be some who are killing in the darkness!" came a squealing, wailing cry from one rat, which was choked instantly into a sob, as Varey scientifically severed the speaker's spine at the base of the neck.

Then, clear and shrill from a hundred throats :

"To hole! To hole! We are being killed in the dark!"

Followed a rush like the rush of wind among leaves in autumn. For a moment the darkness was pricked with tiny green flash-lights in pairs—always in pairs—which were the eyes of many, many rats; and then—silence. The stoats were alone. The rats had melted into space as a smoke-puff melts. Such is the effect of sudden panic.

"But they will come again," chattered old Varey, looking about in his peculiar energetic, business-like way. "And they will be all buck-rats this time, all fighters, and they will be wanting us; and then—oh, Varey!"

"Will ye run, then?" snapped his biggest son, a fire-eater in miniature, exactly eleven

inches long. "Since when have stoats feared rats?"

"And will ye face odds of a thousand to one?" his sire replied.

"No."

"Then turn and go."

And, suiting the action to the word, the old stoat led the way to the open again. Next instant he stopped dead and flattened to earth. In front those pairs of eyes were stealing back, furtive, peering, infinitely cruel. It was like the stealthy return of a wolf-pack after a rifle-shot had scattered its hungry members, and it was not sweet to behold. It made a cold shiver run down the back, this silent, purposeful gathering of the tiny twin lights. More especially it was not nice to behold for the stoats. As old Varey muttered through clenched fangs:

"My whiskers and claws! They are between us and the open."

And so they were. Nothing was left, therefore, but to creep through the wood and try to effect an exit on the other side. Then began a procession extraordinary—a procession of flattened stoats, nose to tail, most engrossed on their own business, and hoping devoutly that everyone else would mind theirs, through a wood overflowing with rats, who did not know where they were quite. It was a sort of nightmare creep. Everywhere in the well-like blackness flitted those little greenish lights in pairs, and

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everywhere was the smell—the unclean smell—of rats.

Once a rat blundered clean on top of the line, and lifted up his head to say so; but Mrs. Varey fell upon the nape of his neck, and he never said anything any more. Once, too, an old reprobate of a rat scented them, and spun about threateningly with the gibbering war-cry of the rats upon his tongue, but old Varey went in at his throat, and his son cleverly got in the death-grip from behind.

All might have gone well if one of the young stoats had not chosen that time to sneeze. It was a small sound, but big enough in that still place. Instantly, as at the holding up of a hand, every pair of gleaming eyes became still, staring, fiercely brilliant, in the direction of the sneeze. Then began a sound—a low, half chattering, half squeaking—which rose from a whisper gradually to a steady murmur, the gibbering of hundreds of rats. A horrible sound, not to be compared with any other on this earth.

"Up this tree!" cried Varey, shooting like a little red streak up the trunk of a large oak. "That has done it."

And it had. The murmur was rising each minute like the terrifying "Bo-o-oo!" of a mob. The stoats had been scented as well as heard; and it is no good thing for a stoat to be found in such company—no better than for a spy to be discovered in a besieged city.

Varey ducked into a hole in the tree, where a woodpecker had driven a short tunnel and a chamber in the solid wood (no small matter) for housekeeping purposes.

"We may hold this," he grinned, a minute later, thrusting his fierce little head—all teeth and whiskers—out of the hole. "For a space we may hold it, a sun's round maybe, but—there are very many rats."

He glanced down and listened to the increasing rustle—not unlike that lesser rustling which you may hear in a disturbed wood-ants' nest.

Now and again a pair of pinprick lights marked where a rat glanced up, but that was rare: rats seldom look up.

"Even a cat—or a family of cats, for that matter—could not live long here," he went on. "There are thousands of the naked-tailed, naked-footed scum."

Half an hour slipped by, during which the eastern sky became a little less blue-black than before, for dawn was at hand.

"Ah," cried Varey at last, still standing motionless, peering down through the branches, "they've marked us!"

A hundred pairs of twin gleams had appeared, as electric lights that have been switched on suddenly. The rats were looking up at last.

"Ough!" said Mrs. Varey, squinting over her lord's shoulder. "They will come up the tree."

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"Not this night," replied Varey. "See, dawn comes, and they will not risk such a fight in the daylight, unless we go down; and then—and then they will tear us to pieces——"

"Hi, Little Slayer!" shrilled a voice up among the paling stars. It was Noctule, the giant bat. "Ye are caught now! Ye will die!"

"And for each one that dies another will step into his place!" snarled Varey grimly. It is always so with stoats. They follow in each other's tracks continually, like a chain, and it is a strange fact that if you slay one, another will very soon appear to hunt over the dead one's especial hunting-grounds, and to lair, as likely as not, in his den. "Others will be here before another sun rises. But," added he, turning to his mate, "they alone could not save us. They can but skirmish and kill a few. We must seek other help—help from one who can slay without being slain, who cannot take harm from a million rats."

"How can that be?" hissed the young stoats. "Why, even a man would turn aside if he met a 'flitting' of rats; and there are *three* 'flittings' gathered here."

"I say there be such a one," replied the old stoat. "And he would come, he and his mate. But who could carry him word?"

"I will carry him word, whoever he is!" they cried in chorus. "I might rush through!"

But old Varey knew better. Even at midday,

when rats are supposed to sleep, some would be left at the mouths of the holes to watch the tree, and some would be abroad, for it does not seem to be generally known, or realised, that rats are out much by day, bird-hunting, egg-thieving, seed-questing, and more especially in search of water, for which necessity they will risk anything, even the danger of the hovering dread kestrel falcon itself. One scream from them would bring the dusky army out in thousands. Nevertheless, the father was proud of his brave young, who offered without hesitation to attempt what they knew to be the impossible.

"No," he said; "thou canst not. Wait a minute, though." He looked up at the sickly sky, where the bats were weaving mazes as they danced the dawn dance, and to them he cried aloud: "Noctule! O Noctule! I crave a boon of thee!"

One bat swooped down and paused on fluttering wings close to the tree.

"Wilt carry a message to the Ghost Bird?" Varey asked.

"But he will kill me," squeaked the bat. "And so wouldst thou if ye had me within spring. Why should I carry messages for such folk?"

"Claim the 'truce of a rat plague' from Ghost Bird. He will kill none other but rats, then. Tell him I, Varey, the Little Slay, sent thee. Say he must come, and come quickly. Moreover,

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I and mine—ay, and all stoats—shall keep truce with the bat folk in this wood till next budding of leaf (spring). / will answer for the truce. Is it a compact?"

"Bear witness, O bats!" cried Noctule. "A truce is declared—a truce for carrying word."

And he flickered off so quickly that none saw the going of him, as bats have a trick of doing.

"Now," said Varey, "we must wait."

And he curled himself up just for all the world as if thousands of rats, more or less—probably more—were not thirsting for his blood below, whilst one of his sons kept watch.

In a few minutes a reckless young buck-rat, who wanted to show off, climbed that tree just to spy how many stoats were really in that hole; and the young stoat waited for him just within the entrance. He looked in, that rat, and he may or may not have squeaked. Anyway, he returned to earth quickly: in fact, he fell; and when the others examined him, he was dead, and it was not the fall that had killed him. Then they ate him, because—oh, because they were rats, I suppose; and the young stoat mocked at them from above.

Thereafter the sun awoke and drove all these night-folk to cover; but after they had gone the young stoat could still see scaly tails hanging out of several of the holes nearest the tree, and knew that at the end of each tail was a sentry rat.

So he mocked them afresh, because he was losing hope (you see, he had never met Ghost Bird), and called them "garbage-eating, carrion-hunting, flat-footed, goblin-eared, ullage-smelling, cannibalistic offal," which they undoubtedly were, though he needn't have put it quite so baldly.

And the day strode on, and the sun leapt up, showing all things stark and true, and the pheasants came down out of the trees, shaking their burnished feathers and saying, "Chuck it! chuck-chuck it!" And the blackbirds slid about, giving false alarms, as blackbirds will; and a squirrel sat (chestnut-red on copper-coloured leaves, against a dull green background bathed in golden sunlight) and washed his face; and all the clamour of the day swept up as if nothing had happened during the night at all.

Time passed, and the stoats slept (slept, if you please, when that was awaiting them which was awaiting them); till at last the sun grew red in the face, and all distant things became blue-grey or pink, and there fell on the land that silence which goes hand in hand with the dumb, dank mist. A rat squealed where the darkness gathered under the trees, and another answered from somewhere among the lengthening shadows, and all the wood stirred shudderingly in the deepening dusk.

Varey awoke, and his family with him, and

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their eyes grew red as they remembered what was coming; and they cleaned themselves from head to foot, ready for the fray.

Then, as darkness shut down, came a sound, a horrible pattering sound (like rain on leaves), and the rats came hopping forth in their hundreds. Noctule was abroad too, and his mouse-like form darted diving and flickering to and fro among the branches.

"I told Ghost Bird," shrilled he (he has a very small voice, has Noctule), "and he said he would come—would come!"

Next moment claws scratched on the trunk, and a sea of hard, cruel, glittering eyes below closed in about the tree with an ugly, blood-thirsty chatter.

"Now we begin!" snarled Varey, as he bared his glistening white little fangs, and made his fur sit up all over after the blown-out fashion of a cat, and swore very shockingly indeed. This sitting-up of the fur, by the way, is a bit of Nature's business-like common sense: it makes it more likely for an enemy's bite to fall short, to close upon only fur, in fact. What is more, they did begin.

The rats went up that tree with a rush. And what happened about the mouth of that hole is best known to the rats who returned, and they won't tell. Some returned in a hurry, red and un-nice to behold; others crawled down slowly, hanging on by their claws at every stride, and

they seemed ill; and a few came down through the air, head first, and these forgot to get up and walk away. And if it had happened that you had picked these rats up, you would have found that all had been killed in the same way, by a single puncture behind the ear; like pole-axing, it is scientific and effectual.

"If we must die," screamed Varey in a muffled voice, because his teeth were fixed in a rat's neck, "let it at least be said that we died fighting! Take that, Flatfoot!" And he dropped his lifeless foe into space, turning upon himself like a snake in time to meet the next.

Two of the young stoats lay defunct among the dead rats at the bottom of the tree within ten minutes, but they had sold their lives at a price—a dear price. Oh, it was a great battle! And two more stoats hurried from the downs and joined in, and a plucky little atom of a weasel, weighing five ounces, must needs fling himself round the outside of the fight, killing right and left where he could, and chattering his longing to do so in pure glee where he couldn't: "Kill the cannibals! Who fears a flatfoot?" he yapped, enjoying himself hugely.

But the issue was never in doubt. Nothing in this country on four legs could hope to face that horde for long. The rats paused for a time, until one of their number (a great, ruffianly leader of rats) sang out suddenly:

"Now, O rats! Rush and slay! *Rush!*"



THE FERRON OF THE

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THE TERROR OF THE "FLIT" 37

And they rushed, swept upwards in one squealing, tumbling, foaming column.

Then, and not till then, there came drifting through the wood two things like ghosts, with enormous round eyes, and huge wings which flapped and flapped, and made no sound. That was the terrifying part about those things—they flew swiftly, without that swishing of wings which we have learnt to regard as inseparable from the flight of all birds.

They swept above the rushing rats, checked, swung, and hung hovering. Both together they opened their beaks (they had beaks hooked and cruel, like a fish-hook), and—oh, horrors!—they *snored*. As true as I live, they snored—a prolonged, penetrating, hollow, nose-y snore. And the rush of the rats fell away from that tree, as a wave falls away from a steep beach. It was just for all the world as if a spell had been suddenly cast upon them, sending one and all back to the ground, to remain each just in the position he had alighted, crouching, shivering, but not daring to move body or limb. And the stoats, peering from their hole, remained motionless, with the red light of anger fading into as near fear as a stoat could show; and even the weasel (whose boast it is that he fears neither man, nor beast, nor devil) "froze" where he stood.

Suddenly one of the things screeched a malignant screech, and all the rats jumped together, and were still again.

"Do ye hear us, O rats?" it cried. "It is our will to harbour in this wood till there be never a rat left alive. Can ye slay us?"

"We cannot!" chattered all the rats, in terrified chorus. And the stoats shivered uneasily where they stood; for the things were owls, white owls, which are feared by the small wild folk beyond all else.

"See, O Vareys, we will remove thy foes and let thee go in peace; but only because ye claimed a 'truce of the rat plague,' which provides that all the hunters shall combine together against these cannibals."

Then they fell, both together, like stones, and without a sound, and rose again on the instant, each clutching a rat; and the rats, who knew that they were powerless to pull down these winged terrors, removed—melted into the ground and the darkness, in a flash, and for their lives.

Then finally the stoats also evaporated swiftly, and without comment, fearful lest the owls alter their uncanny minds, or forget the "truce," and slay them also.

And that is the story of how the owls raised the siege of the stoats, and how the stoats endeavoured to stop a "flitting of rats"—and failed. But you must not thank me for it. It was Noctule who told it me—Noctule, the big, high-flying bat, who spends his whole life in destroying noxious insect pests, and would be very glad if you will remember that fact when next you

THE TERROR OF THE "FLIT" 39

think about killing him. And as for Varey—well, don't you think you might remember this story when next you want to kill him too, for you can take it on my honour that the evil he does to man is "written on brass, but the good is inscribed upon water." This story is a case in point.

THE SENTINEL



T was the black eye-patch that did it. If Nature had not been pleased to label him with that, and thus give to an otherwise pretty and quite innocent-looking personality a sinister scowl, one would have dismissed him without a second look.

The second look revealed much, other than the scowl. It revealed a great grey shrike, a butcher-bird, which those who know him best will tell you is another name for trouble. He had another name too, which was *excubitor* (the Sentinel), as will transpire later. It revealed a paradox also, for no bird about the size of a thrush, and belonging to the innocent warbler tribe to boot, and uniformed in an ash-grey cape, white breast suffused with the faintest hint of rose, black wings with slight white pencillings and brownish tips, and tail of the same but bordered with white, has any right to go about armed to the teeth, bristling with pugnacity, strung up with daring, and possessing the two black eyes aforementioned to warn people and quite spoil the effect of the beautiful livery Nature had garbed him in.

Why should he? He belongs to a tribe of innocents. He has no earthly precedent in having a hooked bill and claws that would be called talons if they grew on a hawk. Of course, with the spotless character of his relatives to back him and those fine feathers to display, no one—I am alluding to the wild folk—suspects him until he has got them into such a position that—well, suspicions no longer matter.

The sparrows began the trouble by mobbing him when he arrived. The chaffinches made the trouble worse by contesting the nesting rights in the great thorn-hedge that guards the Lost Orchard, whilst the wood-mouse added the finishing touches to the trouble by commandeering one of his mate's eggs—the first one—and getting itself caught in the act. The mouse lost an ear and the shrike his temper, and both of them an egg; for it fell during the war-dance and was smashed.

I am not, by the way, going to tell you just where Lost Orchard is, because to do so would be giving away other people's secrets as well as my own. It may, or may not, be in England, but wherever it is, it is beautiful by any standard of beauty. There are poplar trees there—and the same were the Sentinel's watch-towers—great upthrust columns of warm green, that turned to a dancing sheet of shimmering silver when the summer breezes took them, and warm banks brilliant with regiments of foxgloves raising

erect their flaming lances, where lizards posed as Roman bronzes, and dazzling hover-flies flashed back the splendour of the sun. Here in the afternoon the shady lanes between the apple-trees rang with the far-sounding "Tui-tu tui!" of the snaky wryneck proclaiming to the world that there really was no room for him and mother partridge on the ants' nest, and the tom-tits chanted "Ting-a-ling! Ting-a-ling!" as they followed one another in streaks of yellow and blue from tree to tree, and here and there showered blossom from a shaken branch betrayed the brilliant salmon breasts of cock bullfinches off duty and—at their favourite pastime. And there were shady corners there, too, beloved of the orange-beaked blackbirds and toads, who ambled out of the damp ditch to sit and puff fat vulgar smiles in the sun, and it didn't make it warm for those long-legged hurring oddities who seem to be the race-horses of the spider world.

The first warning that the wild folk had that which was to follow came one day when the mate of that wood-mouse which stole the cheese went for a walk. She hopped brooding to herself in and out among the grass that flanks the thorn-hedge. She saw the shrike sitting on his favourite dead apple-bough which he used as a watch-tower whence to swoop on insects. Also the shrike saw her. He seemed to be looking in the opposite direction, but that was only his way.

And the bird had a long memory—he had not forgotten the matter of that egg yet.

Presently he streaked after a grasshopper. The grasshopper jumped into nowhere, as these insects will, and the bird returned to his post without it. The mouse paused to watch him with her beady eyes, and after a time picked up something upon which she fed. She held the delicacy in her pink, hand-like forepaws, and straightway forgot about shrikes.

She would most assuredly have died within that minute if the chaffinch—who had much better have left the whole business alone—had not said something. Probably he was still smarting over his defeat in the matter of the nesting site, an occasion when he had lost quite half of his rosy complexion. Be that as it may, he flashed out of the thorn-hedge and yelled.

There are occasions upon which it is best to leap first and look after. The mouse knew that, for she was one of the wild folk, and they always reverse our proverb. She leapt, that mouse, and the shrike shot past over the spot that she had just vacated with an angry "Shake!" which meant murder, if anything did. Then that mouse went away quite quickly, and the shrike returned to his post as if nothing had happened.

The chaffinch, however, who did not seem able to recognise facts when he saw them, continued to annoy the shrike, and called up three

companions to help him. They became excited, and showed their commonness by adding high-pitched abuse to the excitement. In fact, they used language quite unprintable here. And a wren, hearing them, came to join in; and everyone knows in the wild what a little shrew the wren is in the matter of abuse; though they all might have known quite well that the shrike is not named butcher-bird for nothing, and have taken warning at the thought.

As for the attacked bird, he sat still in scowling silence until someone knocked him sideways off his perch. He did not fall far, but recovered himself with some cleverness and dashed at the crowd, crying in a loud, harsh voice:

"Shake! Shake!"

It may have been the strange cry that brought it, or it may not, but instantly there slid from the top of the thorn-hedge a dusky shape which "did things." It executed two spirals in the air, and then, gliding down with speed, hit the chaffinch on the back of its head, instantly dislocating its neck, so that it dropped to the ground as if a stone had struck it.

Then the mob melted in haste—as mobs do when the fighting turns up—and the mouse, watching from his hole, scratched his one remaining ear and went to bed, and silence fell—that hushed, awed silence of a summer's afternoon.

The dusky shape was the shrike's wife, a fit

mate for sure as he. Like most hen birds, she did not make much of a hobby of "dress"—that was left for her husband; but, in case anyone made a mistake, she retained the scowl, also the armament, and her hobby just now was her own eggs. Perhaps she was in mourning for one of her last year's children. I cannot say. Anyway, she was darker than her resplendent lord, and was apparently too hardened to blush even faintly on her breast as he did, but carried instead little crescent-shaped marks there, which had a pleasing effect if nothing else. As a matter of fact, too, these dingy colours suited her purpose, which was not to attract the sharp eyes of inquisitive, hungry strangers to her nest.

Then the dying sun, thrusting copper bars through the branches, lit up a strange scene.

It showed a terra-cotta splash on the deep blue-green of the grass, which was the chaffinch with his skull hammered in. It showed the shrikes, now transformed by the said sun into blood-red evil-doers, picking up that corpse and, after much labour, bearing it away to the great thorn-hedge. It was noticeable that they did not, or he did not, carry the booty in his claws as the official birds of prey do. Shrikes are, in fact, not yet qualified to rank as anything but unofficial birds of prey in the making, and their talons are not yet strong enough to carry that which their beaks have already developed strength to kill, so the beak does the carrying as well as

the slaying. He held this "kill" with his beak across its shoulders. They did not bury it nor did they eat it—then. If, however, you had passed that way next dawn, you would have found the luckless chaffinch hung high upon a thorn, as an insolent reminder to any whom it might concern that it does not pay to "monkey" with the Sentinel.

It may have been that the wood-mouse dreamt about the loss of his ear and woke with it (the loss, not the ear) rankling in his rodential heart. It may have been, but I do not know. Anyhow, he was seen peering into the shrikes' nest at one o'clock in the morning.

Birds sleep very soundly, far more soundly than animals, and, by the same token, the mouse was enabled gently to force his head in beneath the hen shrike. He could even feel one warm egg with his whiskers, and he guessed by the fluttering movements that it must be pretty near hatching, that egg.

Then he ceased guessing for quite a long time, for a fragile wisp of a beast, a long-eared bat, came clipping in among the boughs, intent upon a ghost-moth hunt. The moth hit the mouse and hung there. The mouse withdrew his head with a jerk in no small fright, wondering what in whiskers had seized him, and—oh, horrors!—the shrikes woke up.

Then it was as if mad fiends had been let loose in that hedge, and the mouse removed,

not slowly, to the nearest cornfield lest worse befall.

It is not a good thing, if you have made an enemy or nurse a blood-feud, to stop out late and alone. The mouse found another nest, and below it a young bird, which had been thrust out by a new-born cuckoo. He was, in fact, detained late on business, so to speak. And suddenly it was day, rampant, raw, grey, cold, naked dawn.

The mouse appeared to discover this fact suddenly, and spinning like a top upon his slender haunches, bolted down the hedges with a squeak of terror. He knew the penalty of law-breaking in the wild, and he was one of the night-folk, whose law is to remain hidden during the light hours.

He squeaked at sight of a jet blackbird with an orange beak standing motionless, as if carved from coal, on a bed of white daisies. He squeaked when he fell over a bunch of feathers which, before the night and a weasel came, had been a bird.

But he squeaked most of all when a black-and-white apparition with a pale chest came down upon him without any warning at all. He noted—even in the fraction of a second that he was given—that it did not fall with the swoop of a hawk, but with an odd, sliding sort of a glide, and it said "Shake! Shake!" as it came.

Followed a sudden chaos and a miniature

whirligig. That morning the mouse was hung up, for all and sundry to behold, beside the chaffinch, in the butcher-bird's larder; and *his* neck had been dislocated also.

This "larder" was a peculiar freak of savagery, and is one which has given to the shrike class their name of "butcher-birds." (They are nearly all "butcher-birds," but only the great grey kind is also the "Sentinel.") The idea seems to be to spit food not immediately required for the table upon thorns—the longer and more spiky the better—till such time as the "butcher" requires to replenish his "inner man." This "larder," however, was not near the nest exactly, though it was in the same long thorn-hedge. It was, in fact, far enough away to avoid risk of drawing the attention of the curious to the nest itself, and probably we are right in assuming that this fact was in the bird's brain—even if hazily so—when the site for the "larder" was chosen.

The sun was barely up next morning, and the mist had not yet cleared from the long grass in Lost Orchard, where it made the gnarled grey stems of the fruit-trees look as though they were standing in water, when a quiet "Truii! Truii!" from high overhead discovered our Sentinel perched, like a bird carved in granite and marble, on the topmost branch of the highest poplar of all. For a space he was hard to see, then the sun touched him, and he shone like a shard, clearly

visible against the dark foliage from quite far away.

Beneath him the orchard was waking rapidly to life—although the almost river-like wetness of the herbage was apparently not to the liking of any of the wild folk very much. The larks had been making the world beautiful to the ears since before the first glaze of day touched the east—they did not live in Lost Orchard, by the way—and the thrushes, who had been up since a little later than the larks, were still singing with their own peculiar and amazing excitement; a single blackbird was dropping an occasional lazy flute-like perfect bar or two upon the cool air, and a willow-warbler—already hard at work canvassing the jewelled wet fruit-twigs for its microscopical prey—put in his dainty, fairy-like descending cadence—like tiny drops of sound tinkling down a diminutive stairway—and from the thatch of the old barn the first sleepy sparrows were beginning a half-awake chirp. But for the most part the wild was busy at its breakfast, and silent in consequence.

Then suddenly the Sentinel on the poplar-top took unto himself life and began to scream. And instantly every bird and little beast within hearing jumped to attention. In a second, too, the screaming was taken up by his mate on her nest in the thorn-hedge. The larks stopped singing, and the thrushes were silent. Stop, too, did the blackbird, and the sparrows stilled their vulgar

jargon. And all the time, from the poplar-top and the thorn-hedge, that infernal double screaming kept on and on, as if the two shrikes had been simultaneously smitten with a fit.

Slowly, one after the other, birds and beasts melted into their surroundings and were not, but one felt that they were there all the same, a hundred keen and interested little eyes—watching, watching, watching. At last it seemed as though there was nothing alive in all that world of dewy, jewelled, glistening green earth, and blazing blue and amber sky, but the two shrikes, who screamed and screamed as if their hearts would burst, both sitting quite still—except for the drooping of the cock-bird's wings, the raising of his neck-feathers, and "working" of his beak—both looking straight in front of them apparently at nothing—screaming.

It was an uncanny exhibition, and being quite without explanation, a crazy one to boot.

Then at last, quite a minute after the insane racket had first started, the eyes of an African negro—which are much quicker than those of any European—might have discerned far, far to the south-eastward, a speck, as it were a pin-point of dust, hanging in the golden sky all alone. At first it just seemed to be poised there motionless, a mote perhaps on the eyeball, a bilious—But no. It was moving. It grew—grew with every moment, was coming nearer, was, in fact, approaching rapidly across the won-

derful face of the heavens. From a speck it swelled to a dot; from a dot to a blob—erratic and circling and wavering as a tadpole in a pond; from a blob to a smudge, and from a smudge to—a bird. Yes, a bird, a big one, beating rapidly through space with swiftly-winking wings.

And all the time the Sentinel, his shortish, hooked beak pointing straight towards the oncoming bird, kept on screaming, screaming, screaming.

And then, just at that very moment, a thrush, who had broken the law of the thrushes in venturing too far from the hedge, rose and made a bolt, low over the ploughed land, for Lost Orchard. It had, we may presume, gone afar in search of worms, till it heard the Sentinel's far-resounding tocsin and promptly squatted close to the earth, trusting to luck that it would not be seen. Then, when the oncoming big bird was close upon it, the thrush must have recognised it, and realising the danger, lost its head and bolted for cover, which was really the most silly thing it could have done.

The big bird, without checking for one instant its swift flight, dived down and fell in close behind the now squawking thrush, gaining rapidly.

It was in this instant that one saw the bird close enough to identify it as a big hawk.

It was in this instant, too, that one realised—out of the corner of one's eye—a lightish streak

flicker from the top of the poplar, and a darker one from over the hedge-top further up, and both together converge in a long loop upon the hawk. And at the same moment the screaming which had come from the poplar and the thorn-hedge was now coming from beside the hawk.

The watchers saw the great bird drop her claw to grab at the thrush; heard almost simultaneously two quite audible impacts; beheld the hawk half turn over, and saw her again rise rapidly—leaving two of her own feathers to float slowly down—and sweep swiftly on her course over Lost Orchard, whilst the terrified thrush shot with a final cackle of panic into the hedge.

And then, as she shot over close above them all, it was clear for the first time what had happened, and why she had been baulked of the thrush. Flying around her, now above, now below, now behind, but never in front, with quite unexpected agility for birds whose flight did not normally strike one as anything to boast about, pecking and darting, dodging most amazingly, and screaming all the while with a rage that fairly took the breath away, so absolutely fiendish it was, were the two great grey shrikes. And from what one could make of it the hawk was—not in the least bit afraid, of course, oh no!—but burningly anxious to get as far beyond Lost Orchard and its frenzied devils of inhabitants as possible in the shortest time available.

She went. Oh yes! I give you my word,

she went, that hawk, amazed and stupefied at these two birds, who ought to be innocent songsters and were, it seemed, children of the devil. And all the birds of Lost Orchard got up with one accord, and shrieking fit to burst their dear little throats, joined in the chase as if they were in the habit of hunting hawks daily for a pastime. As a matter of truth, though—but don't you say I told you—if that hawk had turned to offer battle there would not have been one of that gallant crew in sight after the lapse of three seconds, save the two shrikes, save only them. Nature, it seems, has created them to counteract, if I may so put it, the real birds of prey. Perhaps it is jealousy on the shrikes' part, perhaps envy. I cannot say. Anyway, be the motive what it is, the great grey shrike seems to hold a roving commission to guard all the wild against the official birds of prey, and does it with a courage that astounds you when you remember his size. Verily, they christened him well in the old days who named him Sentinel.

In half a minute the smaller birds had settled down again, but it was quite a minute before the harsh "Shake! Shake!" of the shrikes—which itself reminds one of the cry of the kestrel falcon—could be heard across the sky, and the birds themselves could be seen returning, looping along with their odd wagtail-like flight, the one to drop and work her mysterious way to the secret nest, the other to again take up his watch on the poplar.

From time to time as the morning drew on and the sun rode higher and higher and the heat flurry began to dance out on the rolling fields, the quiet "Truii! Truii!" of the Sentinel came floating down from the heights. Anon he would drop on a long slant to the thick grass, peck, and return with a brilliant green grasshopper in that murderous beak, or would suddenly dart off, fly-catcher fashion, at some humble-bee lazily droning along on the upper air, or mayhap a flashing dragon-fly, all rainbow wings and ruby eyes, which merely laughed at him over the matter of flight. Now and then he would drop from his perch, and, as if sliding on an invisible wire, hung from the top of one poplar to the top of the next, take up his perch on a neighbouring poplar, thus gradually, as the morning passed, working his way almost round Lost Orchard.

Once—that must have been about high noon—he fell smartly to a crumbling wall, and there, in deep shadow under the father of all the cherry-trees, did furious battle with something dark and goblin-like and as large as a bird, which was crawling there. The something, in spite of a fearful array of terrifying and furiously grabbing horns, got the worst of the argument, and the great grey shrike, rising, went slowly flying away through the open sunlight, bearing gingerly in his beak, and with respectful caution, the biggest and most fearsome-looking stag-beetle that you

ever saw. He, this grim one, was spiked on almost the largest thorn of all in the larder, his horns solemnly clasping at the sky—a creepy sight. Once, also, one of those sudden and unaccountable battles, that are peculiar to these low-caste birds, broke out among the sparrows who lived in the thatch of the Lost Barn, and the Sentinel's keen eye, piercing down from his watch-tower, saw two cock-birds drop, dying, from the disgusting scuffle ere it ended as suddenly and meaninglessly as it had started, and these also he attended to in his own peculiar way, and hung up proudly in the larder—much to the disgust of half a dozen burying beetles, who had visions of using the corpses for their own horrible purposes. Several times, also, from hour to hour, the warning shriek of the Sentinel from the top of one or other of the poplars rang suddenly like a tocsin across Lost Orchard, sending every bird within hearing helter-skelter towards cover, and awaking his wife to encouraging and furious counter-shrieks from the depths of the thorn-hedge. But always the hawk, or kestrel, which the Sentinel's quick eyes had picked out of space, stayed there, and left Lost Orchard out of its direct beat, and things quietened down again.

And so, from dawn to dark, day in day out, the Sentinel passed most of his time.

Now, it will be remembered that the sparrows were the people who mobbed the shrike when he arrived at the Lost Orchard. Since then they

had improved upon their act by mobbing him whenever they found him.

Sometimes they found him sitting on one of his watch-towers; sometimes diving in and out of the banked hedge foliage on Heaven and himself alone knew what secret business; and sometimes he was arguing with his wife, when the two would screech and yell, and claw and tear up each other's complexions most affectionately. Mostly, however, he hung round his larder.

It became a strange, if not a beautiful sight, that larder, as the days wore on, also it explained many things which till then had remained a mystery.

It explained, for instance, where two out of the five young bank-voles—whose mother kept house among the gnarled hedge-roots—went to. It explained what happened to the baby wren who fell out of her nest; the harvest-mouse that climbed up a bean-stalk and never climbed down again; and the yellow-hammer that vanished without reason given, after habitually sitting—a smudge of pure yellow against many greens—on the top branch of the Blenheim Orange, singing "A little bit of bread and *no-o* cheese."

One day a sparrow sat alone on an outcrop of the big thorn-hedge, worrying the silence with a dissatisfied and incessant chirrup, as sparrows will. Came an answering chirrup from just round the solid green corner. Then they were at it, chirrup against chirrup, cutting the soft,

warm stillness of the afternoon sunshine with a see-saw of unrestful jabberings.

A rat came out of a hole and cursed them from afar. A robin—a splash of new rust surmounted by two black beads—looked out of a green-blue hole in the banked leaves and called the sparrow names; and two more black beads—which were not the eyes of a robin, but of a weasel—gleamed where the grey, cracked roots crawled about the mossy ground.

At last the sparrow came to the conclusion that the other fellow round the corner was a cock-bird also, and was making even more noise than himself, and, therefore, needed abolishing. He hurried round the corner, chirruping shrilly: "Now then, off you go, you—" or words to that effect.

Then he stopped. That is to say, he ceased to move—halted dead with the abruptness of one who finds himself suddenly at the edge of a precipice. He had to, for he found himself looking into the sinister, scowling orbs—was, in fact, eye to eye, and beak to beak, with the shrike.

And the other sparrow? There was no other sparrow only the evil shrike, and from his hooked beak had the perfect imitation, the decoying chirrups, emanated.

Thereafter certain things happened, and certain other things, which ended in the sparrow occupying the place of honour—the largest thorn

always reserved for "big game"—in the larder. A cockchafer was his neighbour on the right, a grasshopper on the left, whilst above his head the head and horns of the stag-beetle completed the picture.

A little later his mate came to perch beside her lord where he had sat chirruping. She was aware suddenly of the shrike circling above her, then descending on a slant, he hit her with such force that her back was instantly broken. He caught her almost as she fell to the ground, and hurrying with her to an apple-tree, stuck her head in a small fork of a branch, and scientifically plucking her, consumed her in eighteen minutes, leaving not a scrap of her behind.

That night, before the moon was unveiled, Fate, in the shape of an old buck-rat, came to the butcher-bird's larder. What fiend's business occupied him for a full hour in that haunted chamber is known only to himself, but when the moon lit the night he had gone—so had the sparrow.

The sun had barely smouldered into royal flame when the shrike came gliding slowly through the dawn haze to his larder. His thoughts were not of Fate at all, but of breakfast. Then he swore—or, at least, it sounded most like a swear—suddenly and vehemently through his cruel, well-polished beak. His keen scowl shot half a dozen different ways in as many seconds, and he "flung up" above the

larder, and perched with a vicious f-r-r-r-pp of wings.

"Shake! Shake! Shake!"

The grating wild cry cut the dark, vault-like air of early dawn with startling suddenness. The hen shrike, close-cuddled above her newly-hatched brood in the hedge, sprang to the air as a soldier springs to his rifle at the call "To arms!" And the rat, far down in the unclean tunnel, heard the cry and flung about savagely, as if he expected the very sounds to seize him.

Birds awoke and called one to the other through the growing light, and a greenfinch, quite close to the larder, said "Geee-e-e!"

It was unfortunate for that greenfinch that he had spoken, for the shrike, who was very angry over the robbing of his larder, fell upon him suddenly, and would have killed him if a young sparrow had not blundered out and saved the situation. The greenfinch fled, and the sparrow should have fled, but, instead, he went to adorn the larder.

And together the shrikes sat and admired their handiwork, or flew at each other's heads and fought after the manner of cats with unholy screechings. Why they did this is not apparent. It may have been a form of love-making, or, again, it may have been natural, fiendish temper. They always acted thus when they were together, these gentle birds.

Then a great noise in the direction of the nest sent them back like grey streaks drawn athwart the green. They found a big and splendid bird, a rosy, white-and-black wonder, with a patch of sky-blue and black checkwork enamel on each wing. He yelled at them in the voice of a scraped nutmeg-grater, and raised a flaring crest to emphasize the fact.

He was a jay, and the same is the most resplendent large bird, and the most rascally in the three kingdoms. He expected to deal with small birds. So he did, but not quite the kind that he bargained for.

Greenfinches, bullfinches, blackbirds, or robins were more in his line. He was a thief by profession, but not a warrior, and any who meddled with the shrike family required to be all of a warrior. There was war, unadulterated and red-hot war. And the jay was in it, right in the very middle of it, because he had been given no time to get out of it.

He had breakfasted off a shrike baby—he must have watched the mother off her nest, I think—and the old birds seemed to be looking for that baby and to know where it was. The result was a dilapidated and astonished jay, fleeing for his life before two pocket fiends that appeared to possess at least six pairs of claws and three painfully-hooked beaks apiece.

After the jay had retired, the shrike went to his favourite pastime of decoying young sparrows

by imitating their call. When they came close enough, he slid down upon them on a long slant and with some suddenness. Thereafter he dealt with them not gently, but very swiftly, and had vanished into cover again with his booty before the sparrows could call together a mob to abolish him.

This gentle game kept the sparrow colony in the thatch of the Lost Barn in a state of frenzy, of alarm and counter-alarm, of plot and counter-plot, of attack and counter-attack, for the best part of the morning. It also added three newly-fledged sparrowlings to the larder, to say nothing of a chance wren.

Later came furious shrieks from the Sentinel, and after the shrieks, a hawk, who sat on the roof and preened his feathers. He was a sparrowhawk, I think, but never a sparrow did he see that morning; only fat beaks guarding inaccessible holes, which beaks jeered rudely in a language unbecoming his dignity.

Then that hawk quitted thinking about sparrows for quite a long time. He should have heard the continuous twin shrieking which filled the Lost Orchard and have taken warning, of course, but either he was young, or reckless, or a fool, or all three. Anyway, he was aware suddenly of a "whrrp" of wings above his head, and of something hitting him over the eye, and before ever he could open his wings and slide from the barn-top into his beloved air, his

feathers were flying and he had pains all over him.

Half-blinded by wings flapping in his face, half-dazed by whacks on the head and the breast and the back and the neck and the tail, he launched himself in a hurry. It seemed to him that about half a dozen mad birds had chosen that moment to fall upon him all together. He was taken by surprise, and anyway, was not out to do glorious battle, but to obtain food without battle, and the blood trickling down from his head and completely closing up one of his keen, haughty, yellow orbs about finished it, I think. He fled, fled ignominiously from this abode of devils, and shot into the landscape, and did not slacken speed till Lost Orchard lay "hull down" behind his long tail, and the attacking force, who were also the shrikes, had long since let him go and returned to their home in triumph. After all, what would you? It is not part of a hawk's game to get hurt while hunting anyhow, and such foolish fads as honour and so forth are of no account to him and distinctly unhealthy into the bargain, excepting always where his own nest is concerned.

After this our shrike went to a hedge of hawthorn and brambles, a wondrous place, where white, gold, and blue butterflies flickered the day long, and green, amber, purple, and electric-blue flies ruled streaks in the air, eternally chased by huge emeralds set on great gauze

wings, which may or may not have been dragon-flies.

Here a yellow and pale-blue ball of feathers flashed after one of these gems. The gem went, and the ball of feathers, returning to the hedge, was attracted by so perfect an imitation of its own disappointed call that it flew to the spot to investigate. It never returned, for it was investigated in its turn by the shrike's cruel beak—which had also copied its call—and it was found to be a blue-tit, which is own cousin to the tom-tit.

Slowly the shrike beat his way heavily through the hot and languid air. He was bearing his trophy home, and in his scowling eye—even though he was only a bird—was a glint of the pride of the hunter, or of a father, which are, perhaps, the two purest prides on earth.

The great heaped tangle of the thorn-hedge was very still as he neared it—very silent and very hot. It may have been some warning conveyed by that same extreme stillness that bade him alight first and survey, or, perhaps, it was the habit of caution which comes to all those that live as a bandit and hold their life in the hollow of their claw. He halted, he looked, he saw, and his neck-feathers rose, and he bristled.

Something was moving in the nest, something which did not trouble to—or had forgotten how to—conceal the fact. Only two creatures in the wild have lost the art of moving circum-

spectly, the rat and the sparrow. It was not a sparrow, so it must be a——

Great hawks and eagles! What was that?

Something—it looked like a dusky streak drawn at high speed athwart the sky—shot down to the nest. Its advent seemed to be the signal for trouble and for the opening-up of a whirligig, of a sort of living, brown catherine-wheel, which danced over and under and in the nest all in the course of a finger-snap.

It brought the shrike to that spot as if he had been fired out of a spring-gun. He found—no mere human eye could have unravelled the tangle—his mate, a brown rat, and his two—the rat had eaten the other—priceless nestlings mixed up in a heap. Being a bird and a father of birds, being also a bandit who took fighting as part and parcel of the daily programme, he added himself to that heap merrily.

During the next few minutes that rat was just about the busiest rat that ever cleaned a whisker. He had come for shrike, and he got shrike—but a good deal more of the breed than he cared for. He, too, was a bandit, and fighting was part of his profession, but he was not fiend-proof, and these two birds were surely at least the children of fiends.

When he had surrendered one ear, had felt what it was to have a tail neatly peeled (rats' tails peel like a peach) for half its length, had lost

most of his complexion, and had been deprived of about one-third of his fur, he invited himself out of the trouble by the simple expedient of falling backwards off the nest. He landed on a thorn, rebounded on to, and almost startled into the grave, a basking rabbit, and fetched up in—nowhere. That is the way rats go; a case of now you see them, now you don't.

After that the heavy-scented silence shut down upon the place, and deep peace brooded over the thorn-hedge and Lost Orchard for a space.

The shrike couple seemed to have had their fill of warfare—they were carmine-streaked, as it was, and feathers which should have decorated the living birds, decorated the ground and the tangle beneath the nest instead. They took to legitimate insect-hawking again, and their larder held nothing finer than a grasshopper, and a fat and fluffy white moth occupied the place of honour.

Young birds went a-wandering, as children will, past the bandits' fastness and returned to their mothers unharmed. The sparrows continued to spoil the corn crop without mysterious "missings." Mice climbed up bean-stalks and came down again at their pleasure; and wrens, which dived and hurried—on Nature alone knows what secret business—in and out of the black tunnels leading to the heart of the great thorn-hedge, did not finish up upon the thorns of the

butcher-birds' larder, as they had generally done before. It was as if there never had been any bandits at all.

One day the shrike sat on a bough incrustated with dog-roses—himself a picture of grey and white—and watched the gambols of his offspring. They were just beginning to learn that wings were constructed for another purpose than fluttering when one wanted food. The result was grotesque; it was also many falls, much unholy noise, and a considerable amount of ungraceful gymnastics. But it was not flying.

Anon came a starling and a bevy of toad-like young starlings, who sat about in squat attitudes and squawked. They belonged to the purple-headed, or Siberian, variety, who are aliens—cruel, avaricious, and untrustworthy—and have no right in any peaceful country at all. Then they, too, got the flying fever, and usurped the place.

Naturally the families became mixed up, and none could blame a young shrike for blundering into the old starling at the end of a particularly promising effort. He meant no harm. He just lost his balance—something to do with the angle at which he held his tail, I think—and came down gracefully, faster than he meant to, on Mrs. Starling's head.

Followed a sidelong twist of the purple, snake-like head, a lightning lunge, a tiny, splintering

impact, and the starling passed on as if nothing had happened. Only the young shrike was lying spread-eagled upon the spotless green, and he was quite dead, and it was not the fall that had killed him. The starling had driven her beak clean through his skull, and if she had a reason for doing so she never gave it, nor was it apparent to any beholder.

For a few seconds nothing happened. The young birds—Heaven alone knows why young perching birds should be cursed with a foolishness greater than fowls—noticed nothing. Then—well, then things happened.

Who so surprised as that starling, that alien, Russian, mercenary starling, with the murderous, snake head, at what followed? It fought. Oh yes, it fought! It had to, for the shrikes had both gone mad together, and were dealing with that starling with their lives for sale, and the result was startling.

Never had there been such a fight in Lost Orchard since Poison One, the viper, met and fought the hedgehog all through a long summer's evening. Up and down the great thorn-hedge it waged, and another starling came to help, and the sparrows and chaffinches gathered and hindered the fighters, and the rat hurried up from his hole and peered upwards at the turmoil with wicked, shrewd eyes.

He saw his chance, that rat, and fell upon the

dead young shrike, but a stoat fell upon him, and his day's work was done!

If the starlings had been in the open they could have made a better show, I think. They were not, however, and it made all the difference. Moreover, they had to face birds who had more brains than any other birds twice their own size.

In a manner of speaking, the shrike is the type of the thorn-hedge. It ought to be called the "thorn-bird," I think, so perfectly has it made use of the possibilities offered by abundant spikes.

None saw, not even the starlings, the import of the shrikes' tactics. At least, none saw until one starling, hunting the hen shrike too hotly into the bristling recesses, lost her way and her head, and later—when she had become entangled in clawing briars in a frenzied hunt for the exit—she lost her life. That is to say that the shrikes, threading the well-known maze as to the manner born, went in at her both together, and—well, she never came out again.

If anything were needed to turn the shrikes into more complete fiends than the starlings had made them, and to wipe their newly-acquired, law-abiding ways away, as writing is wiped from a slate, that thing was not lacking.

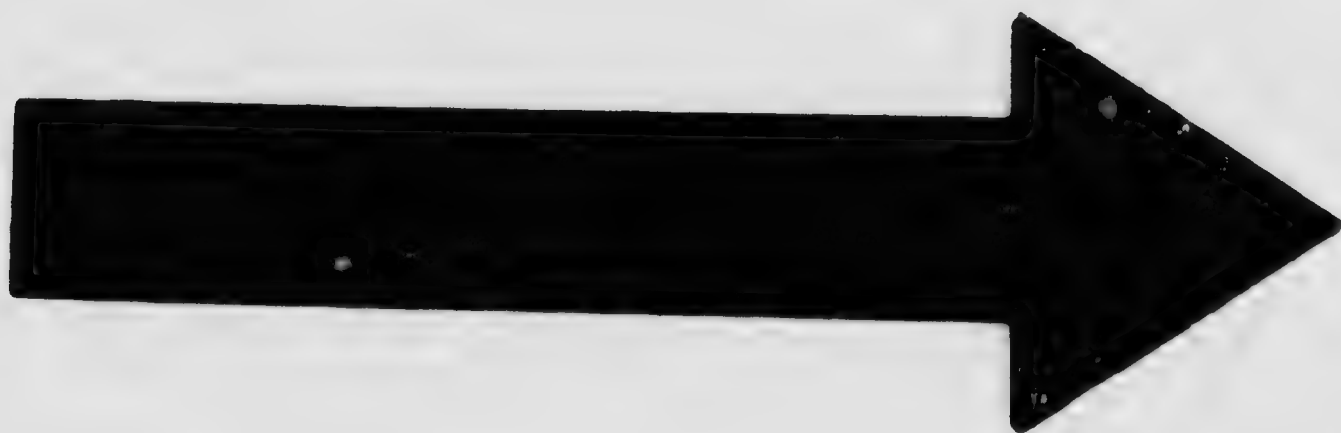
They failed, after they had attended at the funeral of the starling, to find their only two remaining young. Upon an hour, when the

fight began, they were; upon the next quarter of an hour, when all was over, they were not. And no one said where they had gone to, for the simple reason that there was no one there to say—only the silence that spells calamity.

It is possible that the sparrows mobbed one of the young shrikes to death. The blue-tit, who was there, thinks it was more than possible. As for the other one—well, there were his feathers, and there, on a gnarled bough overhead, sat a black shape that traded under the name of rook, but which in reality was any sort of a bad lot that you like to put a name to. He was cleaning his beak—you know the knife-and-steel way birds have of cleaning their beaks on a bough—and that which befouled it was not water, for water is not red.

What followed doesn't matter, because in the morning the shrikes had gone, and Lost Orchard knew them no more.

Probably they went back to their real homeland whence they had come. This only is certain, that, even in the short interval allowed before their departure, five young birds—sparrows mostly—vanished into space, three gaps appeared in the ranks of the chaffinch tribe, and two mice failed to return to their holes. Also the butcher-birds' larder was left full, with every thorn in it bearing a burden. The shrikes took their revenge, and the sight of it was shocking to behold.





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1.4



1.6



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had, he would have seen the skua anchored head to wind, waiting his chance. This would have made a difference to him, and to the bird—but no matter.

In time he came to a place where the flat-cheeked rock was cracked. It was not easy to get at that place, even for so nimble a footpad as himself, being cut off by a small but efficient morass. Here in the cleft, hidden in a natural store all of his own, he hid his egg and departed. And the keen, penetrating eyes of the bird noted every movement.

Anon the fox returned with a young eider-duck—a mere fluffy ball of down—quite dead, and placing it with the egg, departed yet again. He was laying up his winter hoard. And when the cold came, the terrible arctic cold, which it very soon would, all that winter store would freeze hard and keep fresh—or as fresh as would do for the fox—till next summer's warmth came again.

Down came the skua. Into the cleft thrust he his long, hooked beak, and out came the egg. This was finished in a few seconds, and he was just starting on the youthful eider-duck that had been, when something snarled behind him.

There was a vision of upflung forepaws, wide jaws, and suggestive fangs as the fox sprang up over the bleached rock.

Now, it is a penalty of all the great fliers that they rise from the ground slowly; only your

short-winged bird jumps off with a flying start, so to speak. The skua, whose profession demanded a cool head and ready thought, saw in a flash that those fangs would reach him before he could get under way, and seeing, acted.

It seemed as if he bent forward and flung out his beak. The motion was strangely suggestive of a snake striking, so quick, so sure, so absolutely without warning. A lightning lunge, with an odd twist at the end. And the fox stopped. That was all. He stopped.

After a little, when the skua was a melting blotch on the horizon, the fox walked slowly round several times, as one who has run his head against a brick wall. He had not, but it was a mere fluke that he had not lost an eye, as well as his senses for a few seconds, in that argument, for the lunge of that useful bill had been driven home with extraordinary force and precision just above the fox's eye, and for a moment—which was all the skua wanted—had knocked him silly.

One of the penalties of being able to make "of the heavens a high-road, and the sea a market-place," is that one is forced to eat like fury to balance the enormous expenditure of energy. A bird is all energy; it lives in the very utmost sense of the word, and consequently is consumed with a mighty hunger. It must gorge to fly, and must fly to live.

This lucid statement may explain what the

skua was doing only ten minutes after, loafing round an islet in this same land of desolation inhabited solely by geese. There may have been ten geese and ten ganders here, all very short in their tempers.

The raider sat on an outcrop of sand and stared blankly at the North Pole, deaf to the maledictions hurled upon him by the owners of the place. A gander flounced at him open-beaked, hissing far worse than any snake, and he lifted light as thistle-down on buoyant wings. Then the gander went away, and the raider returned to his perch.

This sort of thing went on for half an hour, till the ganders retired in disgust, and everybody forgot about the sombre, brooding figure on the sand-spur, and the business of the place, the comings and goings, the gabblings and the conversation of "sib-sib-sib" and "grog-grog-grog," which is the wild goose's way of talking scandal, went on as usual.

The ganders spread abroad sheep-wise, grazing, and gabbling as they grazed. The geese came up from, or went down to, the water with their families, stopping by the way to say things to other geese, and the young, waddling and paddling, and dibbling, frolicked even up to the hard, strong legs of the motionless skua.

He, that raider, said nothing, and moved not so much as a feather. Only as he stared straight down his long, murderous beak, he very solemnly

and very slowly closed and opened one eye. It may have been a wink he was exchanging with Fate, or it may not; you must put what interpretation you like on that coincidence. Anyway, in the game of hazard he played always with Fate he looked like winning another throw. This, however, was a hazardous throw indeed, almost the most hazardous he had ever attempted in all his chequered career, for whatever may be said about the baby geese deserving their name of a fool, there could be no doubt about their parents; they were pretty well the cleverest birds in the wild.

Somebody shouted suddenly or screamed or fluttered, or did something equally futile. Every broad-beaked head, mounted each on a long, strong neck, shot up from the half-alive, wiry grass, and looked one way—towards the noise of the scuffle.

Something was happening on the outcrop of sand. The skua, which till then had been a statue of sober granite, was struggling with something under his feet which utterly refused to keep quiet, and half a dozen goslings were beating a hasty, half-running, half-flapping, more than half-stumbling, retreat. One little fellow in his hurry had fallen on his breast, and lay kicking and crying for help frantically.

The ganders came back with a rush that made the foam fly. Every goose threw herself with spread wings above her young; every goose, that

is, save one. She was executing a double-quick slide, between a run and a fly, to the outcrop of land, and she was speechless.

Her speed, for so ungainly a fowl, was a surprise. Quicker than the ganders she sped; quicker even than her own mate, whose heavy wings were already bearing him to the spot clear of the ground. You see, she was the mother of that thing which was mixed up with the skua's legs.

The change in the raider was startling. From apathy he had jumped to high-pressure action. It was touch and go, and he knew it; for between his claws was a gosling. If he could not quieten the little fat one swiftly, quieten it enough to carry it off, the game was up, and, ah——

The goose was on him like a whirlwind, and a goose taken that way is no trifle; she expects no quarter, and gives none. Pivoting clean round, the skua faced her. Butcher he was, but no coward; his worst enemies could not call him that.

He made some lightning-flash play with his beak. He did something very quickly. And the goose staggered as if she had received a bullet full on the chest. It was, however, the skua's bill, which for the moment seemed to have much the same effect.

She staggered momentarily, with a working portion of the wind knocked out of her. It was but a matter of half a dozen seconds, anyway, before she recovered. It was enough though.

In that space the skua was up—his sickle wings whistled like steel—and the gosling was with him. Then, if ever, all the speed and power of wing which Nature had given him to defy tempests, and—eh—living tempests with, was needed, every ounce of it.

He knew his opponents—knew that the gander had already got up speed; that the goose was not likely to dally; heard the “whew-whew-whew” of their wings, and the hissing that meant murder if he were caught; and that gosling must have been well fed, his weight did not help matters.

If you can picture the flight of a pirate schooner, heavily laden with plunder, before two large, towering, but well-armed merchant ships, you will in some measure be able to picture the flight of that skua across that No Man's Land, where half the birds of a continent were spread to watch. It was a great chase, with a life to sell either way.

He was conscious of a roar, like unto the roar of a gale in a forest of stripped trees. He saw out of the corner of his eye a cloud suck upwards behind him after the fashion of a water-spout; and he knew by these tokens that he had roused the entire community—or as much of it as lay in his path. He was also very painfully aware of the nearness on his right rear of the ceaseless, quick whimper of the gander's wings, and took no comfort from the knowledge.

Then Fate, in the shape of a white bar, came down from the heavens on his left, and he saw a goose go out of life in a puff of feathers. That, he knew, was a Greenland falcon at his work. The falcon had, as a matter of fact, been waiting and watching for that chance half the day.

The confusion which followed cannot be described in words. It is beyond the power of brush; beyond imagination, even. The whole ground, for half a square mile, seemed to get up and fly about, and the raider took advantage of it to retire coyly into the horizon, thanking his flight-feathers that he had not been retired from life instead. And the gosling afforded a very fine meal.

It was some hours later and near the day's end—though that makes little difference in the far northern summer—when the raider located the camp of the tern people. They had pegged down their claim on the sand-dunes, and held it in partnership with the black-headed gulls.

He heard them long before he saw them, and, if one judged by sound alone, they were birds of low degree. The colony lived in a perpetual uproar; everybody quarrelling with everybody else for no reason at all.

They were different to look at, however, very different. He saw them at first through an amber haze, white and grey flashes, streaks and circles against—he was flying above, remember—a background of golden sand and pale-green sea.

They might have been magnified grey-and-white swallows with black heads, but they were impetuous beyond any swallow, excitable past belief, straining, impatient, fretful, highly-strung to a degree.

Here were common terns with coral legs, and Arctic terns almost exactly like them, and giant Sandwich terns, and pigmy lesser terns, and, most beautiful of all that fairy-like crowd, roseate terns with breasts like a pale rose.

The keen-eyed pirate bird steadied his wings and dawdled with the breeze. There might be a chance here, or—such things had been known—he might even make one.

They were fishing. They were always fishing. Very dainty they looked with their knife-like wings, and shapely, sharply-forked tails. Very quick they were also, like intense flashes of light; and he wondered, as he came to anchor, so to speak, on a dune, if he were capable of making one "bail up."

He was all the time keenly searching for their young. They must have young somewhere. He knew that; but it is not given to everyone to discover the young of terns after they are a few days old. They are there, and yet they are not there. Goodness and their dainty mothers alone know the secret of that hiding. It is as if they had the power of invisibility.

This annoyed the skua. He was by way of being a trained expert in the finding of young

birds and eggs. It was his profession, or part of it; the other part was that which followed.

He rose and loafed seawards above the fishers, humming a tune, as it were, and, to look at, entirely unaware of them. That was part of the game. He never once looked directly at a fisher, only he regarded them sideways, and he marked who had a full catch of glistening sand-eels, and who failed.

The terns were plunging down and going clean under like plummets, but the black-headed gulls waited for the shoals to rise.

Suddenly every gull sat plump down on the water with a "plash," and he knew, by the same token, that he was recognised. No skua seems to care to attack a gull unless the gull is flying, and the attackee appears to be as well aware of the fact as the attacker.

Followed a prolonged pause, and after the pause a keen, sharp-beaked bird, with a white keel and a black back, bobbed up out of the depths as if it were a fish, and had been living down there in the green silence below. That bird was a guillemot, and he carried two fish in his beak, and he alone knew how many more farther down.

Then suddenly, without any sort of warning to explain the miracle, the sea was given over to these birds. They bobbed up everywhere, fluttering and jerking in a spurt of spray. One

moment they were not, the next they were—in hundreds.

When one of them rose on quick, stubby wings to go home, the others followed and met the skua, who dropped lightly a hundred feet or so, and screamed a rancorous, suggestive scream much too close above them for their personal peace of mind. If he expected a general disgorging of fish, he must have been annoyed not a little at what followed.

The whole flock fell like a cartload of stones, turning tails up and showing like a shower of silver sparks. A hundred bursts of spray shot up, and a smother of falling water followed, and those guillemots went out as a picture is erased from a slate; whilst the winged pirate swept over the place where they had been with an enraged yell that made the floating gulls duck their heads and glance anxiously towards the shore.

Long after, those gulls *swam* ashore, and, by dint of much stealth, found their nests.

It was while the skua stood asleep on one leg at the very extreme point of a sand-spur thrust tooth-like into the sea, that he became aware of eyes regarding him from the water. Something, some intuition, must have awakened him, for there was no sound beyond the eternal snarl and mutter of the waves and the distant clamour of the bird hosts.

It is not a nice thing to be steadily stared at

by large animal eyes which seem to belong to the cold, heaving green sea and to nothing else. What lay behind those eyes only the water knew, and the water would not say.

The skua opened one keen orb, and met the eyes with that expressionless regard peculiar to all birds. Half a second may have elapsed between the opening of the other eye and the opening of both wings just as quickly as ever he unfurled those vast air-sails of his in his life.

Then suddenly he lifted, with a hurried, mad, strenuous flapping, about three feet. It was all he could do in the time allowed, and the time allowed was nothing at all worth speaking about. A huge, bloated, snorting mass, reeking of fish, shot past underneath far up the slope of sand, and came to a halt on its nose and with a roar, and the sand yawned as sand does when water has been suddenly thrown upon it.

It was a seal, a grey seal, and a male to boot, and the same is a death-trap to pretty well all the northern birds as well as the fish.

Twelve hours later, in a damp, blanketing, dumb fog, the skua was sighted by the duck colony. Let there be no mistake, this was no small gathering of what we call wild-duck. It was a city, mustering thousands of nests, and the ducks were of the sea, wild-looking wanderers of the waste, haunters of wind and wave, land and tempest-harried shores. Here were the pochard, and the scoters, black as night, scaups

and tufted duck, and great, long-necked heavy, velvet scoters. The water was alive with them, the shore crawled with duck.

The skua was upon this colony without warning, thanks to the fog; dropping out of nowhere, and seizing—before one could cry "Murder!"—a scaup baby.

"Pomatorhine skua! By Jove! Let him have it. Full plumage, too."

The voice came from behind a clump of rushes, and something gleamed, an unmistakable, bar-like gleam that can only be made by a gun or rifle barrel. In the sickly sun dribbling through the fog, there was enough to see that.

Luckily, the skua was still under way, had not yet ceased gliding. His head jerked round on the instant, and in the same instant his scimitar wings came down with a whistle. There was no pause between his upward spring and his falling headlong sideways, letting himself down a couple of feet, and hurling madly into the mist.

The young naturalist behind the gun, one of an expedition of collectors, was a good shot. His aim was a true one. The shots went where he meant them to go, but they did not stop the skua. That odd little yank in mid-air, that dropping as if the skua were on the end of a string, had done the trick; and the fog did the rest.

The skua went away quite quickly, and far enough. If, however, you let off two barrels of

a twelve-bore not more than twenty yards behind a pomatorhine skua, and he learns, for the second time in his life, how it feels to listen to lead shot whimpering about masterless, he is liable to break away and lose control of himself like a bolting horse.

This may or may not explain why he ran into a dumb, black bank of fog that would have made any ship's captain swear himself blue.

It was like charging at fifty miles an hour into a mountain of well-soaked cotton-wool. And the collision which followed was no less violent for that reason.

The skua stopped with a jerk that seemed to drive the quills of his tail through the nape of his neck, and he felt as if every bone in his neck had been separately and suddenly broken.

He was conscious of a huge, white wing locked lovingly in his own pinion, and of having his head screwed sideways into a white-feathered body. Also there was a scream, one scream only, and it was quite enough. No innocent throat emitted that deadly yell.

Then he fell, head over tail, and backwards, through an endless sea of treble thick fog, without bottom, or so it seemed. After many years of falling—in reality it could not have been many seconds—a sand-dune shot up and hit him on the head.

Then the terrifying silence and stillness rose up and engulfed him, and he knew no more.

Three hours later, a retriever belonging to that young naturalist salvaged from a fog-bank overhanging some sand-dunes the crumpled body of a very fine pomatorhine skua first, and the equally blasted and quite as fine carcase of a white Greenland falcon after.

"By Jove!" said the young naturalist. "They must have fallen a couple of hundred feet."

Which they had. But he did not know how or why. A monstrous glaucous gull, the colour of virgin ivory, alone knew that—he was passing at the time, and told me of it later.

THE CLOAK OF DAGGERS

BEFORE he was much more than a year old, Prickles discovered that he was the only animal in the wild that could walk abroad openly, who could wilfully and safely break all the laws of self-effacement, stealth, cunning, care, and caution.

Although only a foot and one inch long—and that is a great length for a hedgehog—and two pounds three ounces in weight, he feared nothing in the wild save badgers and gipsies. Fate and the economy of Nature had provided him with a complete cloak of whitish spines, ringed with dark brown, about an inch long, and as sharp as daggers. The same kind visionaries had given him back-muscles which allowed him to copy the little woodlice—which he ate—and roll up into a complete ball. The result was a sort of spherical pincushion, only with the points of the pins sticking outwards. And one does not, if one is a wild creature, refuse to make way for, or willingly fall out with, such a pointed argument.

Prickles stood at the mouth of the cave which the hedge-roots formed, and stared across the rolling pastures. The rain slid down with

a dull, resigned steadiness only known to Britain, and the sun went to bed quietly behind a lead-grey cloak. It was a lugubrious scene, relieved only by the clean, invigorating smell of wet earth.

Prickles was not pleased. The fact was evident to any of his neighbours who cared to look, though none did. Like steel the small razor-sharp teeth flashed as he raised his snout; his little pig-like eyes smouldered. Trouble was coming for somebody.

He turned in his tracks where he stood, and glared in at his nest and his wife, his life-long mate, much concerned as to the welfare of her five blind white babies, whose spines were like the soft sproutings of young thistles, and who had numbered six; but some villain had come in an evil hour when the hedgehogs were out to feed, and had removed one.

Prickles was going to look for that villain.

He moved at his leisure, which was somewhat betwixt a crawl and a walk and a waddle, his usual means of progression, not down the ditch as usual, for that was rain-flooded, but along the bank.

Since the first business of every wild creature on waking is, after cleaning, to seek food, and since all the wise men tell us the food of hedgehogs is largely made up of worms and insects, Prickles naturally went worm-hunting. But he flung up his pig's snout in the middle of the

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carnival—worms were very numerous in the rain—and sniffed. Then he moved at his indescribable wobble straight down the ditch, swam across, and entered the copse on the other side.

It was too dark by that time for a human being to see, but any might have heard the wild tumult that followed. Prickles had walked into a hen pheasant covering her brood. Her he had smelt afar off. What followed is not absolutely clear. The baby pheasants had been taught to scatter and hide at word of command. This they did, but one hid itself so effectually that its mother never found it again. In fact, it never found itself, if one may so put it. Prickles had killed and eaten it.

Now this, I must ask you to believe, is neither the legitimate nor the official business of hedgehogs at all. They are not made for it, and he who dabbles in professions for which he is not made is bound to meet trouble undisguised. Prickles met a buck-rat, and that is the same thing.

The buck-rat was falling from a high white-thorn under which Prickles was holding his banquet, having been incontinently knocked off a bough above by an owl. He did not, therefore, see the point, or points, rather, exactly beneath him.

The squeal from the rat and the rolling up of Prickles were coincident. When at last Prickles

uncoiled, and stared carefully out from under his natural suit of spikes, ready instantly to assume the offensive, the young pheasant, or what he had left of it, had sauntered apparently into spookland.

Now, partly eaten dead pheasants do not, as a general rule, come again to life. The phenomenon was unusual, you understand, and Prickles scented about for the reason thereof.

He found it instantly in the scent left behind by the buck-rat, which mingled with that of the misguided baby bird, and the two had departed together. Moreover, the rat-smell and the scent left by the murderer of the hedgehog baby were one and the same—not the same rat perhaps, but undoubtedly rat. The discovery was carefully stowed away in the hedgehog's slow brain, to be slept upon. And he returned home to slumber.

The next evening Prickles moved out from his nest with the calm deliberation that marked all his ways. The sun, glowing like the open door of a furnace, sat down slowly upon the trees, and turned the field of cloth of gold, where the buttercups and the goat's-beard grew, into a sea of blue-black and bronze waves stained with deepest crimson.

Then Prickles started on his long and perilous journey across the field. He was going to the rat encampment along the opposite hedge; but whether the vengeance he medi-

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tated was for his lost child, the pheasant chick, or to settle some long-standing feud, I kn w not. There are many bitter blood-feuds in the wild, but that which exists between the hedgehogs and the rats is almost the most terrible.

In the centre of that field was a large pit, where men in years past delved for gravel. It was furze-choked and crumbled now, and the sun shone with great warmth on the eastern wall of it. Prickles could not have had very sharp eyes, or he must surely, as he ambled down this gently sloping wall, have seen a band outstretched which shone in the red rays like a bar of burnished copper. Nor could his ears have been excessively sharp, or he would most certainly have heard the long, cold, malignant hiss that the copper bar gave out—unless, indeed, he heard it and ignored it.

Then the bar moved and turned into a viper. Not a common viper, mark you—for there are two varieties in Britain, which fact is not generally known—but a red viper, *the* little red viper, compared with which the common brown kind is a lamb for docility.

Now, this viper suffered from the same cock-sureness as Prickles. Every creature it had ever met stood aside respectfully at the sound of that fiendish hiss, knowing full well what manner of death wriggled behind it. Prickles stood not aside. He did not even stop. Instead, he came on, deliberately, clumsily, inexorably, his snout

upthrust in vulgar insolence—the pig-like insolence peculiar to himself and his namesake—his pig's eyes smouldering red beneath the heavy cowl of spines and bristles.

Be it known now that the little red viper is possessed of a very fiend's temper. Opposition in any form is to it intolerable, inconceivable. Thus it was instantly set like a compressed spring—a copper spring upon the coils of which the furnace-red sun flashed again, whilst the flat, evil head weaved the air restlessly half a foot above.

Prickles held his course. If he had seen the snake at all, he did not show it. He also—like all the rest of the great shrew and mole tribe, of which he was a member—had a disreputable, ill-conditioned temper, liable to make trouble at any moment. Yet it was only in his wicked little eyes that the temper showed. His outward indifference was such that if he persisted in it he would waddle—or whatever he called his walk—clean over the reptile.

W-r-r-r-p !

The snake had struck. I say "had" because no human eye could have followed that lightning-like dart, and it was only not a marvel at that moment because of a greater. In the something like a hundredth of a second's margin Prickles had to act in, he had dropped his cloak of indifference—well feigned, indeed—and half rolled himself up. The snake struck spires, practically

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ate spines, and impaled about three inches of its soft throat upon spines as well. Whereupon there followed a strenuous, hissing display of rage fighting against fate, and finding itself beaten in fear.

The little red viper struck again and again, its head darting and rising so quickly that it actually seemed to vibrate. Prickles, now fully closed up—nose tucked into tail, feet against chin—felt the writhing coils twine upon him and relax, and renew the attack again.

Even a red viper, however, cannot put up with this kind of thing for long without coming to grief, and this one did come to grief. It was its own fault, of course, for losing its temper. It is an extremely risky thing to lose one's temper in the wild, by the way. Certainly it was none of the hedgehog's fault that the viper flew at him and nearly impaled itself, nor any of his doing that the reptile continued the attack, maiming itself in the process, but it would be distinctly his fault if it ever went away again alive.

All at once the flat, evil, red head—after one last despairing stroke—dropped on the ground. Prickles had been waiting for that—watching through a chink in himself, as it were. There was no interval at all between the lowering of that head and the clash of the hedgehog's teeth as they met in the neck just behind the deadly little snake's head. It was a quick, smart manœuvre, well executed, cleanly finished, but

one hardly expected it from a beast which three-quarters of a second before had been a spiny, inanimate sphere.

Then Prickles dined, thoughtfully rolling the dead snake from side to side of his mouth as he ate it up, beginning at the head and not letting go till the tail end had vanished, as was his custom. It is a habit of his kind, this miraculous, indigestible dining, but it has its uses.

After that he sat in silence, meditating apparently, while a young moon rose over the fretted trees, and a long-eared owl cried "Kek, kek!" somewhere out of sight. Suddenly he woke up. It was a sound, a thin, high, child-like scream that rose and fell and rose again to splinter the mysterious silences, which roused him.

If you have seen those toy tortoises which run on wheels, you will know in a measure the manner of Prickles's moving over the face of the new-mown sward then. If his legs moved, the cloak of bristles hid them, and the effect was as if he ran on wheels. It was clumsy, of course, but he got there all the same. Got there so swiftly that one wondered how it was that he had not appeared to hurry. That is a hedgehog all over—they make haste slowly. He came to a part of the field high, sandy, and tussock-bearded. There was trouble in that place, and things which struggled together with grunts and scufflings and frenzied gasps. And, straight as

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the needle flies to the magnet, so glided the hedgehog to that trouble. In a circular clearing—which children call a fairy ring—three figures merged together and wrestled in the face of the moonlight, so that they looked at first like one animal. Prickles was within six inches of them before the fact struck them, and they fell apart promptly, and “froze.” They were, one saw, a quite young leveret and two rats—one an old doe-rat and the other a young rat.

Now, what followed was very strange, and worth noting. It may be accounted for by the fact that Prickles was mad with rage after his snake battle. That he remembered the identity of the pheasant-thief before mentioned, or that he still mused revenge against the murderer of his child, seems possible but improbable. Be that as it may, by a strange coincidence, that doe-rat was actually the villain in question.

Instantly, with extraordinary promptness, Prickles turned and rent the young rat where it stood. The act was accomplished so quickly that he scarcely seemed to have touched it. There he stood six inches away. The young rat sat huddled against the tufted wall of the fairy ring. It looked alive at first, but its head hung loose on one side, as the head of a creature dying will, and when at last it fell over sideways there showed a clean, round bite in the stomach. That was all, but it was enough—the seal of the hedgehog. No other

creature kills in that fashion. It is therefore unmistakable.

Then Prickles rolled into a ball, while the doe-rat raged round him like a thing possessed, till the dawn came, and she fled, torn and bereaved. As for the hedgehog, he ambled home.

Now, it may or may not have been chance which led Prickles, the next evening when the light failed, to a certain quarry—the top of it—where an aged oak leaned out almost horizontally above a thirty-foot drop. At the base of the tree, among the roots, was a rat's hole, foul and evil-smelling, and above it, on the base of the trunk itself, was a young rat, about half grown, playing with its own tail. Squat and gnome-like it looked, silhouetted against the dying fire in the western sky; an odd, elfin-eared, pink-handed, hunch-backed manikin with a tail.

So quietly the hedgehog moved, so slowly, and, above all, so evenly, that the rat did not see him while he sniffed at the hole, and marked the trail of the mother going out, but not returning. Two things he learnt then. First, this trail was that of the mother rat whose only other child he had slain the night before. Second, she was away—hunting.

Then Prickles rushed for that young rat like a whirlwind; at least, that was the suggestion he gave to anyone watching. And that young rat had only just time to scuttle along the tree-trunk to save its worthless life. It was wonderful how

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speedy Prickles was when he chose. One accustomed to watch his usual tortoise-like amble would never have believed it possible of him.

He advanced, now that he had the enemy cut off from all retreat, along the nearly horizontal trunk at his leisure. There was a clean drop of thirty feet into the bottom of that quarry beneath him, you will remember; there were also things which ran about and made animal noises down there in the deep, pit-like shadows, and a frog was croaking in a dank corner where still water shone fixedly.

The young rat was out on the end branch now, its back hunched, sitting on its haunches, preparing to turn to bay. It could only retreat a foot or two further before reaching the end of the branch, and beyond that was "no road."

At this moment came a diversion—I might say a remarkable diversion.

When Mrs. Rat had started out a-hunting an hour before, it had occurred to her to visit the hedgehog's nest on the chance that the owners might be out, and she be able to secure another hedgehog baby. They were out, and, seizing the smallest white, soft-spined atom, she fled with it precipitately back to her hole, and Fate arranged that her path and that of Prickles, who had gone before, should converge, and that she should know it.

Suddenly she checked and "froze." It was no more than a half-grown young rabbit sitting

propped against the side of a ditch. It looked quite natural at first, but its head hung loosely down; there was a clean, round hole in its stomach, and when Mrs. Rat touched it it fell over sideways without saying anything at all.

That was the work of Prickles or his wife, and the mother rat knew it, and cold fear seized her heart, so that she dropped the baby hedgehog, and fled homewards with the unholy scent of Prickles on the trail every inch of the way.

She arrived then, half mad and wholly blown, to find the scene described above. She sprang upon the trunk, and squeaked.

It was then that Prickles did a strange thing. He turned clean round and faced the doe-rat, his little wicked eyes glowing like live coals. The young rat was thus cut off by an impassable barrier from home and safety and dear mamma. And—oh, horrors!—Prickles began to back in his tracks where he stood—to back out along the branch.

Now, rats are many things, but even their foes cannot justly call them cowards. That doe-rat went straight out along that tree, and in at Prickles with a streaking, unhesitating rush. Prickles dropped his head so as to receive the charging foe upon the spines of his neck, and at the impact he gave an inch. Then, lifting the pig's snout of him, he laid hold of Mother Rat blindly and where he could—it happened to be

THE CLOAK OF DAGGERS 105

her snout—and, tucking himself into as much of a ball as was possible, awaited events.

They were not long in coming, those events. The branch was constructed only to stand a certain weight—the weight of its own leaves and acorns, and perhaps a little over, such as a bird, for instance. Anything over that made it bend dangerously, and it bent now, so that the youthful rat at the end had to hang on with all his hand-like feet, and hedgehog and doe-rat, having no feet to spare just then, began to slide down that branch faster and faster to the end.

Prickles's back hit the young rat fair in the face. It acknowledged receipt with a piercing squeal, and let go. Instantly the branch shot up and precipitated the two remaining combatants out into space in one fine sweeping curve, and the hedgehog, promptly releasing his grip, tucked himself into himself, so to speak, for his very life. It was, as has been said already once or twice, a thirty-foot drop, and all three beasts came down like a shower of stones. Then there was a treble thud, and—silence.

Five minutes slid away, and an owl came out, shrieked, and passed into the night. Seven minutes, and the animal noises at the other end of the quarry, where were a litter of fox cubs at play, started afresh. Ten minutes, and still the young rat lay on its back in the grass, all four paws thrust up, half appealingly, to heaven, and its mother lay on her left shoulder, her head

doubled round and outstretched. They, at least, would never move again in this life. They were quite dead.

Prickles, however, did move. Slowly, with infinite caution, he unrolled, took a long peep, and calmly ambled away into the blackness of the night. The coat of spines, and the undercoat of coarse hair, thick as a front-door mat, and a grass tussock, had saved him. He had simply bounced like a ball, and taken no hurt. And that was the end of the war between the hedgehog and the rats.

THE OUTCAST



C something was standing in the trellised moonlight beneath the pine-trees. Something, half-shadow, half-seen, half-guessed. And it had not been there a few seconds before.

Being in England, the shadow ought to have been a dog or a fox—but it was not. It was a little larger than a fox, a little smaller than a wolf, and, when it turned, its eyes shone greenish as green glass might do with a light behind it. Then it stepped into the full light and became a coyote—a prairie-wolf.

The reason for so fierce a presence in so tame a land came about as follows :

Four months before this coyote had struck a trap in America—on the south fork of the Stinking Water River, to be exact. One month before he was touring England as part of a travelling menagerie. Upon this night of nights he had been fed by his keeper—who was beautifully and unashamedly drunk. They found the man asleep in the cage next morning ; the key of the cage they found upon the floor, but the coyote they never found.

A thin, high scream cut aslant the silence of

the pine-wood, a scream almost startlingly like that of a child, and the coyote "froze." He sank upon the grass and was still, eyes gleaming, ears pressed close back, thin, lean upper lip lifted a little to display the cruel, glistening fangs. Only his flanks moved, still heaving to the exertions of his ten-mile removal from the menagerie.

Then, quite suddenly, came the scream again, and the coyote slid away on his stomach. He knew that cry, the last protest against Fate of a terrified rabbit.

He came to a hedge and peered through. He saw a shadowy beast with a big bush-tail—something like his own—dragging a kicking rabbit towards the hedge. "Red Fox," said he to himself, and waited. By which it may be guessed that he knew all about foxes.

Reynard came on—knowing nothing in his turn of coyotes—and slid into the hedge-ditch with his struggling prey. He preferred to kill it here rather than in the open, where its pestilential squeal might attract any horror—a keeper, for instance.

"G-r-r-r!" said the coyote, a yard above him in the tangle of hedge-roots, and the fox stiffened from head to foot.

He was frightened, that fox, frightened no end, for he had never heard a growl like that before in all his marauding life.

A head was thrust suddenly from out the matted tangle, and the fox visibly quailed. Then,

behind the head, came the coyote; not slowly, but like a brown streak.

The fox was aware of a burning pain in his near shoulder, and he pivoted, cringing back among the damp, dead leaves of the ditch, forgetting the rabbit. The rabbit had not forgotten him, however; it forgot nothing. It went, or, rather, to be more exact, it was gone, for none had seen the going of it. In the wild it is as well to grab your chance while you can, you may not get another.

But if that rabbit thought (do rabbits think?) he had checkmated his foes, he counted without the coyote. "Check" it may have been, but "mate" was not yet.

In a second the fox—badly bitten as he was—had picked up himself and also the rabbit's trail. Whereupon he went, without comment, into the moonlit haze, and soon, as he galloped, the rabbit danced before him. He could see it, a fleeing shadow, a bunched-up ball and a stretched-out streak alternately.

Bunny had no illusions. The drumming of the four-footed death on the short grass behind left no room for any. He wanted to get back to the warren, which was not far away, very badly indeed. He would have got there if a strange thing had not happened; a thing neither hunter nor hunted expected.

The fox was first of all aware of it—a long, lean, silent, grey shadow which shot—it almost

seemed to fly, so quick was it—past close to him. It had eyes aflame, that thing, and he shied at sight of it instinctively.

In a flash it was ahead. The rabbit may have heard it coming; I don't know. But it is doubtful if he knew what killed him.

Followed a glint of fangs as the apparition shot up alongside the luckless bunny; a snap, but no pause. At full gallop this ghostly spectre had killed and picked up the quarry, swung round in a wide circle, and vanished away, still going like the wind, into the night.

Then at last the fox must have realised that this was his new enemy of the ditch, the coyote, that strange, giant, foxy apparition which had come out of nowhere at him, and gone again as a whirlwind might into nowhere, for aught he knew.

Having dined, the coyote set off across country, at the long, tireless wolf-gallop that will run down almost any four-footed thing in the end. He had no idea how far that menagerie might pursue him, and he was taking no chances. A wild creature never willingly takes chances, you will find.

Once—that was when he bee-lined over a bare, blunt-nosed hill—a line of hurdles leapt up in front of him. He "took" them in his stride and fell, among ewes, many and loud-voiced ewes, who rose and ran about complaining in a full-throated chorus.

THE OUTCAST

III

Seeing that the poor outcast's one notion at that time—possibly at all times—was self-effacement, this action on the ewes' part was unkind. For one thing, it caused him to fly the opposite line of hurdles like a bird, and for another it awoke a long, low, blue beast, from nowhere special, which fell in dumbly at the coyote's heels. The shepherd called it a bob-tailed sheep-dog, but it looked more like a silent demon in the light of the "cynical moon." It took the coyote half an hour to shake that speechless horror off his track.

Once also—that was when he was gingerly rounding the corner of a cattle-muddied gateway—he fell on to and over a warm, feathery, live thing, which got up and snored away into the night on vast, flapping wings, more uncannily than any ghost.

The next five hundred yards he must have covered in record time, for he was scared almost into rabies. The thing was an owl, a white owl, and a big one at that, though what it was doing in the mud of a gateway I know not. Perhaps some rat could have told me; rats are generally intimately—too intimately for their liking—connected with the doings of owls.

And once—that was the worst fright of all—he charged head over heels into something that he could not see stretched across a gap, and it clung.

He fought madly for a space, rolling about,

snapping, and tearing like a thing possessed, for this nightmare held on all round him. Followed, a curse from the shadows, and after the curse a man, and after the man a dog—a thin, lean dog this time.

The coyote did not like the appearance of that dog, it looked underhand, and even a mole could see that it was built for speed. This may explain perhaps why he bit the man on the hand (his teeth met, I am told) and went away into the night with half the unseen terror which clung wildly flapping from his hind-quarters.

The man swore strange oaths and went away in a hurry, which seemed strange. As a matter of fact, however, the coyote had run into a poacher's net stretched across a gap-way for the entertainment of certain hares, and the poacher was about as scared as the prairie-wolf over the meeting.

An hour later came the dawn—cold, un pitying, matter-of-fact dawn—and it discovered this coyote in the middle of a gorse and bog-patched moor. He went into retirement for the day in a fox's earth, which he sought and found in a great hurry.

The stench of the place—for there are few fouler abodes among the wild folk than the den of the little red rascal—made him very literally and shamelessly ill. He knew, however, that anything, even the most appalling effluvium, is better than for one of the night prowlers,

the outlaws, to be found abroad when the sun is up.

When evening fell, and the shadows hunted the raw, red sun home to his lair, the coyote thrust out an inquiring muzzle, and thrust it back again in a hurry. A man was coming through the gorse—a jet-black shadow carved out, as it were, against the crimson sky. Came he to the fox's earth and dropped a rabbit by the entrance.

He gave no reason for so strange an action, but the reason—seven of them—had been found killed in his fowl-house three nights before, and the rabbit was poisoned. Evidently this tit-bit, this gift gratis, was intended for the entertainment of the rightful owner of that den, and *he* happened to be away upon a blood raid in the opposite direction.

The coyote waited ten minutes after the man had gone, then he wriggled out to the rabbit. He gave one sniff, only one, then he went away, also, straight as a die, and very swiftly, with every hair along his back sitting up all bristly.

You see, he was acquainted with poison; he had cause to be, for he had once on a time watched his mother die beside a poisoned carcase, and the terror of the taint which had hung in the air round that carcase lived with him ever after. It had been a nightmare, and the mere whiff of poison a hundred yards to leeward had the effect of terrifying him for hours.

Like a hunted cat, this wolfish beast that was not quite a wolf, panicked across the face of the sullen moor. Then he caught sight of his own shadow cast by the dying sun—a blue figure against blood-red grass—dancing along at his side. He never waited to think, but shot away ten yards in three bounds—and stopped.

There was no question about the stopping. One moment he was racing at I dare not say what speed, the next he just—wasn't moving. And the suddenness of it nearly wrenched him to pieces. He had simply bounded full into one of those quagmires, one of those abominations which pock-mark so many moors.

But no flies settled on this beast. He did not wait even so long as one second. If he had he would have been a very dead coyote ; and he knew it.

How the miracle was accomplished, how, without appearing to pause or think or hesitate, he was able to rebound again exactly as if he had landed upon a spring-board instead of a quaking, shaking, sucking death-trap, is beyond mere human knowledge.

From this bound he reached a tuft of deer-grass—at least, one presumes he reached it, for he barely touched it—rebounding for the second time and on to firm ground at last. Being somewhat scared, he ran on for a few yards along the edge of the bog before he discovered that he was exhausted somewhat, and sat down.

It was the hour of brooding calm, when the sun's last rays, lingering, charmed the purple heather into a deeper tone. In the pine-wood behind him, such was the silence, that the coyote could hear the hollow purr of the air in the upper branches, like the humming in a shell, and the tiny tumult of an ant city—the indescribable, slithering under-sound, which can be detected only in very still places. Night was stalking westward swiftly over the purple lakes of heather.

A jay screeched gratingly somewhere way back in the wood; the last woodpecker had fled laughing into the shadows; the last family of titmice had trailed by, twittering and "twee-jeeing" to each other, through this hall of a thousand columns.

Presently came a long-drawn sigh echoing down the pillared aisles, and after the sigh a big, brown bird, flapping like some gigantic moth; that was a long-eared owl, and it flew without sound as an owl should.

Suddenly the coyote turned his head. Something—some swift-moving shadow—was coming across the bog.

How any beast heavier than a mouse could cross that quaking abomination was past understanding, but the shadow proceeded leisurely and unflustered enough, and it did not sink.

Instantly the coyote, the outcast, slid on his belly to a heather-patch, and lay there

crouched; his green eyes fixed and staring at the shadow.

The apparition came on, bounding lightly from tussock to tussock of deer-grass, half-insolently, half-playfully, it seemed, toying with the suffocating death that it only escaped by a hair's-breadth at each fairy-like bound.

The coyote's lips dripped as he watched. His eyes took on a crueller glow. The thing was a deer, he knew the breed; the slender legs, the arched hind-quarters, the graceful step, as if the beast were walking on air. As a matter of fact she—it was a she—was a roe-deer, but this he did not know. He took her for a prong-horn antelope, perhaps, or a white-tail deer, but no matter; his tactics would be the same.

She passed him—he had taken care to lie well to leeward—quite close, so close that as she vanished like some spirit of the wood beneath the trees he saw the transient gleam of her white rump quite plainly.

For a minute he waited, time enough for her to penetrate the wood well out of sight. Then he dropped his head, and, with tail slightly lifted, settled into the long, easy wolf-gallop on her trail.

He must have known by the scent how close he was, or how far, for never once did he sight her or blunder on to her heels in the pine gloom, nor was she once startled or aware of her tracker, thus nicely did he judge his pace.

As the trail broke from the wood and led, straight now as a die, over the open moor, the pace increased. The lone night-wind whispered in his ears, and the night-hawks and bats did their own small hunting above him. But he never lifted his head. His eyes were glued on the way before him. Only his restless ears took note of that which went on around.

Once a fox halted in the middle of trailing a rabbit to stare at this big, wolfish beast loping by with gleaming eyes; and once something, which was not a fox, though it was as big, stood in his path chattering obscenely, forcing him to go round. That must have been a badger.

Finally—this after an exhibition of clever windings, twists, and turns—the trail led to a spruce-fir wood black as a well, and still as a well—or death. Here was needed great caution, and the coyote slid belly flat. The whorls of the trees came down and brushed the needle-carpeted ground, difficult to avoid, hard even to creep through—hard, that is, when even the faint sound of brushed-back branches would have ruined all in that desert-like silence.

Suddenly, as if some cold hand had seized him, the coyote sank where he stood, sank and was still, like one that is stricken by death.

In front was a clearing, no more than a gap, shadowed as to its centre by one lone, big spruce-fir. And beneath that lonely shade stood the doe, and she had business with something that

was there. She was anxious, that doe, anxious and happy, making odd little noises in her throat, and beside her were two more shadows.

Then she stood out before the moon, and there followed her two fawns, their great, beautiful eyes shining like stars. Dainty spirits of the shades—sleek, shining, satin-eared, velvet-nosed, dappled, and light as thistle-down, upon legs "slender as hazel wands."

How long the coyote lay and watched that wonder is not known; some hours, I think. He might have been a figure carved out of dark and light oak for all the signs of life he gave. Only his eyes lived, those green orbs, with the strange coldness of cruelty apparent in their depths.

At last a badger—clumsy, shuffling, furtive, and morose—passed in the gloom. He was in a hurry, that beast, and when a badger is taken that way dawn is not far off. This the doe knew—or seemed to know. She vanished with her double charge slowly under the pall-like shade of the giant and isolated spruce, and when she came out again she was alone.

As a smoke-puff fades, so faded this elfin-like haunter of the woods. The flash as of a dim lamp, caused by her light rump as she whisked away, was all the indication a watcher would have had of her departure.

The coyote followed, a slinking, evil form in the gloom.

Followed he to the edge of the wood, far enough to see the roe-deer safely on her way—but no farther. He had other work on hand.

In five minutes he was back again by the miniature clearing, crouching motionless as before, watching always the gloom beneath the spruce that stood aloof. And the sky paled to grey even as he crouched.

So intently were his cruel eyes fixed upon this spot that he did not see a shadow—surely it was no more than a shadow—which drifted up from nowhere special behind him—drifted and stopped.

The minutes dragged on painfully, almost as if the dead silence, and the stagnant air, were waiting for something to happen.

A fox passed, slinking and carmine-tinted about the jaws. A pine-marten, "rippling in faultless curves," the incarnation of living, moving grace, went by in the dawn—and his jaws also bore the blood-stain, the badge of outlawry. A squirrel slid down perkily from some tree near at hand, and slid up again in a hurry when it saw the couched coyote.

The fox was red, the pine-marten was red, the squirrel was red, the watching, waiting, shadow behind was red, all of them red, against a background of reddish tree-trunks and pine-needles, lit up all together and suddenly by the fiery red of dawn, that wonderful dawn which comes after

THE PROWLERS

the grey, and is followed again by a day of grey rain.

Suddenly the coyote moved, sat up, and the shadow?—the shadow was gone. Only a gleam as of two faint stars, a flash as of a low-burning night-light hastily extinguished, marked its disappearance, and made one half-suspicious as to whether it had really been a shadow after all, and more than half-doubtful as to its ever having been there at all either. This also the coyote did not see.

Then the wolfish beast moved forward, almost flat he proceeded, and his caution was evident at every careful, creeping stride. There was darkness under the great spruce still, and for a moment after he stood confusedly. Then, in a soft place, just the least noticeable spot, exactly where they would be most difficult to get at, he saw the fawns. They were lying down, but not asleep; they were looking not at him but past him, behind him at something that was there—the shadow had come back again.

A gleam of white fangs scintillated in the growing light, but there was no sound as the coyote half rose and dived forward headlong upon the helpless fawns. They tumbled to their feet. They could run fairly well, fast enough to avoid a man, but not a coyote. And they fled.

Then, without any kind of warning at all, the shadow took unto itself life. It hurled itself

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forward head down, preceded by a low growl, and a pair of sharp horns, at the speed of a bullet, and he was off like an arrow; and its rank the wolf, the coyote, the jackal, the coyote. It was a little brown and black, and all the cloven-hoofed ones were at least troubled with fear of the

The coyote was behind the pack of wolves, waiting to deliver one of his quick, vicious attacks. He was drunk, in fact—when he was not drunk, he was crazed whirlwind hunting—so he was out of control behind.

He realised his danger and, without hesitating for a moment, presented a target for the first shot. The bullet struck him in the middle of the chest and the same second he fell back. Specially designed to kill, the second he was rendered motionless. The sharpest pair of horns he had ever seen. The black he had ever seen.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself lying on the same ground, and the same wind—he was in the same place, and the wind was blowing in the same direction. He was small, no longer than a child, and the world was vast and empty.

forward head down, preceded by short, but rapier-sharp horns, at the speed of a powerfully-shot arrow; and its mark, its goal, appeared to be the coyote. It was a full-grown roe-buck, and of all the cloven-hoofed ones the roe-buck is the least troubled with fear and flurry.

The coyote was behind the fawns—just about to deliver one of his quick, chopping bites on the flank, in fact—when he became aware of a small-sized whirlwind hurtling down upon him from behind.

He realised his danger, and pivoted upon himself, presenting a fanged and snarling front in one and the same second, so it seemed, being specially designed to do so. But in the next second he was removed quite four feet by the sharpest pair of horns and the most impetuous buck he had ever run up against.

When he regained his feet—which was practically the same moment as he touched the ground—he was furious; for this buck was only small, no larger than a prong-horn antelope, and the wound in his shoulder pained abominably.

Next moment the whirlwind was upon him again; the fury of the charge was extraordinary, and amazed the half-recovered coyote. He did not—being only an outcast wolfling—stand up to it, but skipped to one side, and delivered one of his chopping flank bites.

A whirl of pine-needles followed, for the

roe-buck can turn as can no other deer, and the coyote fell backwards, as the quickest way to avoid a hissing slash of those terrible forked little horns.

Thereafter things happened, and happened quickly. The coyote was no amateur in the matter of keeping a whole skin by agility, and agility alone, but the deer he knew were not like unto this little fury.

He leapt, and side leapt, and sprang backwards, pivoted on his tracks, spun like a top, rolled from under the flying hoofs, raced like a greyhound, and generally performed on an average thirty acrobatic feats a minute. His foe, however, plunged and stabbed, jabbed and hacked, stamped and tore and raged and fumed and bucked and backed and thrust and cut and slashed and foamed. The coyote might have been a magnet, and the buck a piece of steel, so close did they follow one another.

Now a coyote, unharried and unpressed, is many kinds of a coward, but a coyote cornered and hanging on to his life by his whiskers, is just any sort of a demon you like to name—that is against wild foes, of course, not man. This may be why, at the end of five minutes of this death-dance, there were triangular gaps on the roe-buck—chiefly about the flanks—where the flesh had been removed in chunks. On the other hand, the coyote was striped

much as is a tiger, only the stripes were red, not black.

Followed a collision. I don't know how it happened. One of the combatants must have made a mistake somewhere. Anyway, they met. It was a bundle, that is all you could say; a huddle, and it was not nice to behold.

The needles flew all whither, and the earth followed suit. Which beast was where, it was impossible to say. Save for the horrible low and continuous snarling of the coyote, there was no sound, but one knew that death hovered round that jumble of legs and bodies.

Then, with a startling suddenness it ceased—the fight was over. The roe-buck was standing rocking in his tracks, as a tree rocks in a gale. The coyote lay on his back ten yards away; and both were unpleasant to behold, were unclean to the sight.

Slowly the coyote heaved on to his feet, and stood staring stupidly—himself rocking to and fro—at his enemy. Then, like a broken thing, reminding one in a singular way of some half-killed insect, he dragged himself away into the red eye of the rising sun; a shocking nightmare of a beast, a blot on the beauty of the dawn. And even as he went the roe-buck toppled forward on his nose, and lay still—for ever.

As for the coyote, he blundered drunkenly—half-blinded and half-choked—straight ahead

to the open moor and its scattered bogs, and into a bog, and under it for ever and all time.

And that is why the dozens and dozens of people, who scoured the country for that lost and outcast coyote, never found him—and never will.

WATCHERS OF THE SEA

 HERE are many strange things in a river at night-time. Things you would never guess at if you were accustomed to view the scene by daylight. The river Routh was no exception to this rule. One night on this same river Routh a whistle—long-drawn and low—floated lazily from nowhere special over the oily swirls across the channel of molten silver, where the moonlight reigned.

Then, without warning, there rose up a head—a flat, broad, enormously-whiskered head—which dripped. It was smooth with the set sleekness of a seal, but the eyes were not gentle enough for any seal's—they were fierce, and had caught something of the cruel, cold glitter of the moon. It was the head of Unrest, the otter. The whistle was his, and it meant:

“Who hunts the reaches this night?”

It was by way of being a challenge.

“H-u-s-h!” cried something above his head.

“There be water-voles at feed further on. I would have one, Brother.”

Unrest jerked his muzzle aloft at the sound

just in time to behold an owl drifting past against the velvet-blue sky.

"Ah!" whistled he. "And I also."

And he was gone. He just went down—sank, as silently as a spectre.

A water-vole—a black little blotch on the silver surface—which was crossing the river a hundred yards further up, turned suddenly because of a tiny ripple behind it. There was nothing more—only that ripple. For a moment it watched that ripple because such things do not come, they are made; and this one, so far as the keenest eye could discern, had had nought to make it. Then that water-vole went—straight along the top of the water, almost as if it was running. It had to. It could smell Unrest behind that ripple. Just as it reached the bank, however, a thing, which had been lying among the rushes, leapt upon it, but it rolled over sideways, and the jaws of a very angry fox closed on thin air barely in front of its nose. Instantly it spun like a top upon itself back to the river, but a long sinuous form shot up under the surface close along the bank, and it whizzed back again just in time to avoid Unrest's dripping jaws.

"Thus we feathered hunters kill," hissed a husky voice overhead, and the owl fell out of space as a stone falls, and with as little sound. But the water-vole shot straight up a tiny hard-beaten game track from the water's edge, and the owl, missing it by a hair's-breadth, had to back-

air frantically in order to avoid collision with the fox, who was dashing in hot pursuit.

Next moment came a clash—there was no mistaking it, the hard, metallic clash of a steel-jawed trap, and the water-vole stopped suddenly, as if some unseen hand had seized it. The fox leapt clean over it to avoid the horrible contrivance, and the owl screamed aloud in wild alarm. The trap had done its work swiftly, however. The water-vole was quite dead before the hunters had recovered from their shock.

"That, Brother, was meant for thee," cried the owl, turning his gleaming eyes upon the fox.

"I know it," was the reply, delivered between closed teeth. "And this, Brother, is meant for *thee*."

And he sprang clean up in the air at the owl, his teeth snapping within an inch of the night-bird's tail, as that worthy shot upwards on swift-beating wings.

"Only I, it seems, am safe," Unrest put in, dropping back to the water and drifting quietly down-stream.

"Which is all thou knowest," muttered the fox, coolly biting the carcase of the water-vole out of the trap. "I heard to-day from Where'sit, the old rogue rat, that there were otter-hounds come to hunt in this district. He had been stealing meat from their kennels."

Unrest backed-water at this. Traps he knew all about. Water-bailiffs he had seen fairly

often, and avoided with no worse mishap than a peppering at long range with a charge of shot. But otter hounds——?

"What be this new talk?" he asked.

The fox crunched thoughtfully at his trapped quarry, and considered the dawn glimmering the eastern sky. At last—it was not a big meal, that water-vole—he stood up and licked his thin lips complacently.

"Thou wilt know before the sun has been long up, if I mistake not," he snarled. "Otter-hounds are bad company, Brother. Dawn comes, and I must get to lair," and he swung about with an insolent wave of his brush, and trotted off into the gloom.

"I also," hissed the owl, rocking backwards and forwards on his great silent wings. Then a thought seemed to strike him, and he dipped a few yards lower. "Remember, when the otter-hounds come, when any danger comes of any kind, go down-stream, always down-stream. It is I who say it—Wise One, the owl. To-o-who-o-oo!"

And away he flapped, like some gigantic moth, among the trees.

The sun had been up some hours, and already beginning to suck up the thousand jewelled wonders of dew that bedecked the meadow-grass, when Unrest, who had composed himself to sleep in a still, many-poled withy-bed, heard a sound. It was not a nice sound in his

ears. Although he had never heard it before, he knew it meant evil. There is no other sound quite like it, in fact: the jumbled, deep, confused, hungry clamour of exactly eleven and a half couple of baying hounds.

An otter—old-eyed and frantic—glanced like an arrow past stream, and Unrest—who was only young in those days—cried out to him as he “took off” from the bank:

“What danger comes here?”

“Go and see,” was the savage reply, given as he darted one die and devoutly hoped that Unrest would go and draw the yapping pack upon his own velvet heels. But Unrest could hear those hounds baying “Kill! kill!” and he went into a side stream instead, where from a hole under a willow stump he viewed the procession.

Then, however, towards sundown, there came a thing to that hole, a thing with bloodshot eyes, teeth worn flanks, and labouring sides—a real apology for an otter—Unrest learned fully what that howl really meant.

“What art thou?” he cried, arching his long sinuous back, and lifting his thin upper-lip slightly at the smell of blood.

“H whom thou sawest this morn,” was the art. “Canst fight, Brother? They come.”

And “they” did come, all eleven and a half couple of them, all wanting that otter very much, and few, which were badly ripped up the fore-

leg and blazoned flaring fang gashes about the throat, wanted him most of all. Unrest's fur sat straight up all over him, and—because he belonged to the weasel tribe, which is the pluckiest of all tribes—his eyes took on a savage glitter as he listened to the raging inferno without the mouth of the hole. For a time it continued, that din; then quite suddenly, to the accompaniment of sounds like pistol-shots—which the old otter said was the cracking of whips—it died away and ceased. Next came hollow thuds, and Unrest prepared to bolt.

"What do they now?" he asked.

"Dig us out," replied the other, who was too much occupied in keeping still to regain his breath to speak a lot.

"Ough!" snarled Unrest. "I go. There is a bolt-hole here which comes up under water. I go."

"And die in the lathering jaws," was the contemptuous answer.

But Unrest did not hear that. He dropped from the bolt-hole and shot across the river through the dull green depths like a silver projectile by reason of the air bubbles clinging to his coat. His path, too, was marked by silver flashes converging away from him in all directions, which were fish who had no wish to meet Unrest under any circumstances at all.

In a minute he took a peep from the surface and promptly dived again like a silvered bolt, for

a yell had met him, which was bad ; and after the yell a running succession of plunges as the hounds took the water with a rush, which was worse. He removed up-stream as an otter alone can, that is to say faster than any salmon—and the salmon is no slow-coach—till a cordon of men drawn across a shallow ford stopped him. Then he turned and dived down-stream, turned, bang in the face of the pack strung out behind on his track. It was a mad thing to do, but he was young ; moreover, even in those early days he began to show some of that extraordinary development of speed and fierce daring which marked him in after years as something quite apart among otters. No one expected this move ; even the hounds did not.

Unrest shot down along the bottom under the right bank, and I dare not tell you at what speed he was going. He saw the legs of a hound paddling steadily above him, saw it turn, beheld more legs, felt rather than saw a great head reach down towards him, became aware instantly of an appalling churning chaos above, as the hounds realised that the otter was actually passing beneath them ; and the next moment it was all behind, all over, and he was racing down-stream with the enraged and baffled pack flung out in a straining cloud behind him.

But the hounds had been running—or swimming—all day, and were tired, and Unrest had

been sleeping all day, and was not in the least tired; and in the end the great umpire Night swept down and called "Time!" and the hounds went back to their kennels disgusted.

Unrest, however, did not halt when the hungry music of the pack ceased to harry his ears, he merely slowed down; but it was a long time before the fur along his back sat down again and the red gleam behind his eyes died out. It was growing very dark indeed, and the face of the river was no more than a whispering mystery, save when the summer lightning flickered to and fro low down in the northern sky. An owl somewhere in the blackness sighed in an evil manner, after the presumed fashion of a ghost, and a fish—it must have been a big one—hit the water with a resounding "plop."

Then, athwart the silence, cut a clean, crisp sound which can only be written "ssh"p—the unmistakable clash of metal—and a thing among the reeds on the bank set up an infernal and insane gibbering. Next moment Unrest stopped short in his stroke because the thing, which had been threshing about, ceased suddenly and wailed a long-drawn, whistling wail, the cry of a trapped otter:

"Take note, O web-footed hunters. Take note, and avenge me, an otter who is trapped," it quavered.

Then the sounds ceased, and only the water sucked quietly at itself, as water will, and a bat

fled squeaking down-stream to carry the news far and wide. Then :

"That is the third of the evil ones I have seen in a trap to-night," said a fine young salmon to a friend, as the two flashed up-stream like bars of silver in the lightning glare. "It is well. Soon there will be no otters left. The third I have seen, mark you, to-night, and——"

"The last," chattered Unrest, turning about and hurling his lithe form after the speaker like an arrow from a bow.

The fish could accomplish something very near a miracle in the way of rushes at full speed, lightning-flash turns, streaking darts to right and left, and all manner of tricks of speed, but he was a mere beginner at the game in comparison to Unrest. Moreover, Unrest had pounced upon him unawares, which the otter loves to do. In one minute he realised that he was doomed ; in one minute and one second he was dead, and Unrest was swimming quietly with the firm lifeless form to the trapped otter, at whose feet he laid it. Unrest was only a wild beast, and he could not set his sister free, but—well, he did what he could.

"Three otters," he reflected. "Three in traps."

"Aye, and three more killed by the hounds last week," shrilled a bat, stooping at a moth above the swimmer's head. "This is a bad piece for otters, Brother. Go away."

"And whither can we go?" Unrest replied. "There is only the river, and that bristles with traps from mouth to source, whilst water-bailiffs are as common as crayfish."

"Moths and beetles!" exclaimed the bat. "How should I know? Ask Wise One."

Then, in a flash, the words of Wise One, the brown owl, came back to him. "Go down-stream, always down-stream," and he began to paddle away at once.

"He said 'down-stream,' and all the wild folk say he is very wise, and very old, and perhaps there is a place where there are no traps, and water-bailiffs are not," he said, half to himself.

About this time began a sound. It was only a little sound at first, just a whisper far away back behind in the night. In ten minutes, however, it had grown to a murmur, muttering and forbidding. Unrest came to a bend in the river and landed at a certain spot where a worn path advertised that it was an otter's landing-place. (When will otters—and all other members of the weasel tribe—learn the unwisdom of following well-marked and hard-defined routes for all time, like sheep? It is unwise at the best, and at the worst it is—unhealthy. It gives the water-bailiff and the traps of the water-bailiff an unfair advantage.) And by the time Unrest had landed the murmur filled the night. Nor could he guess what it might be.

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It was very dark, and hot, and still, and one could hear the splash of a fish a hundred yards away, and the talk of the water filled the air with the murmur—save when the thunder boomed and muttered among the hills, where the river had its source, and a storm was evidently in progress. So dark was it that Unrest nearly fell over a rabbit, squatting at business with some herbs under a hedge side. Both animals bounded at the same instant, but Unrest was the quicker, and his bound partook almost of the speed of a snake. He relieved that rabbit of life—though rabbits were out of his regular menu—and after his meal, passed on, waddling through the fields to the opposite bend of the river. Arrived there, he was about to slide off the polished rock, which the otters passing that way had used for all time, when a head, just such a head as his own, rose up from the water. It was the head of a she-otter.

"Mind that trap just below the water, Brother," she cried.

Unrest stopped dead.

"More traps?" he gasped.

"They are everywhere," was the answer. "There is no safety anywhere. Where can I go? Oh, where can I go?" she whistled plaintively.

Then a strange thing happened. The murmur, which had all the time been growing

steadily louder, turned suddenly to a roar, and, without any kind of warning at all, the river got up and came rushing round the bend in a solid wall two feet high. Unrest gave one mighty bound sideways off the slab of rock and darted down-stream for his life, the she-otter's nose close at his tail. What had happened was that a cloud had burst somewhere up the valley, and had dropped a few thousand tons of water into the river—flop. The result was chaos.

Unrest raced as he had never raced before, and the two cut the stream in an arrow-straight line, the water rising in a little frill about their necks as they hurled forward. But it was altogether useless. That solid green avalanche came striding and plunging down after them at a speed appalling. Unrest had just time to make one hurtling rush for a little inlet, and then all was blotted out in racing, ramping, romping, surging, hissing green and white water. He felt himself lifted up and up, till he wondered if he would be flung to roost with the amazed wood-pigeons. Then he was sucked down, with a horrible gasping in-draw of water, and he felt the bottom scraping under his belly as he was shot along. Anon he returned again to air and noise, and was spun round and round like a leaf, whilst the banks of the river on either hand shot past, as banks of a cutting shoot past a railway-carriage window. He

fought like a mad thing, with his short, strong, webbed feet, to keep his head straight, but a helpless ten-pound salmon hit him on the nose, nearly knocking him silly, and he was a long while whirling about after that. Once he wondered what was the cause of an infernal pain in his tail and an intolerable weight there, which, if he had only known it, acted as an anchor and prevented him from being converted to pulp then and there against the hungry rocks.

When at last Unrest got a hold on himself, as it were, and his utmost efforts held him straight, and the deafening roar in his ears was bearable, he saw that the tormented river had mutinied and burst over its own banks. This he knew because he could see only water—and tree-tops—and there were others abroad on the face of the waters, others who went down-stream, without saying anything, on their backs, and with their four legs pointing straight up to heaven. In other words, this was a flood.

The she-otter was hanging by her teeth to his tail, he discovered, which was perhaps the only way that could have prevented their being parted when the rush came. This accounted for the pain he had felt, and he reminded her without hesitation, with his own teeth, that the worst was over and he required his tail for his own use. Twice they made attempts to turn, but the flood shouldered them on quietly, and irresistibly. This was terrible. They were

being carried out to sea ; they could detect the salt in the water, and make out the ragged fringes of white foam where the breakers died.

"Strike, strike back," muttered Unrest, feverishly twisting round. But the she-otter only laughed as he was whirled, raging and spitting, back into the straight like any cork.

At last they were alone—alone save for the gulls who came to interview the silent gentry who pointed their legs to the sky—upon the lapping ocean, and the force of the flood died out like a wave on the beach.

"We—we are lost," cried the she-otter at last, coming round head to wind with a snort of something very near panic ; for all wild creatures have a horror of the unknown.

"Better than being dead," Unrest answered, as he raised his fierce head and gazed around at the swinging waves and the sunrise in the eastern sky. "Better than——"

Then he jumped clean out of the water and the she-otter dived with a splash, because a big beast had slid up from out the green depths beneath them. It sat on its tail when it had come to the surface, and bobbed about like a mermaid ; only it had a round head like the otters', and whiskers like them ; and—unlike them—the gentlest pair of eyes you ever saw.

It regarded the otters skirmishing about on the wave-tops twenty yards away.

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"Who art thou, so fierce and so small?" it asked at length.

"Otters," replied Unrest, shortly.

"Oh," said the seal. "And what dost thou here?"

"We came on the lap of a flood out of a terrible river where were traps, and men, seeking always to kill us," began the she-otter. "And we"—here she glanced at Unrest shyly—"we seek a place where we may live in peace together."

"Peace *together!*" echoed Unrest with a snort. "Oh, my whiskers! All right, have it thy own way; but mind that big beast doesn't eat thee first."

"No need to fear," sighed the seal, gently brushing his beautiful long whiskers with one flipper. "We be fish eaters, thou and I. Come, I will lead thee to safety."

And he turned and shot away at a pace that even the otters were hard put to it to follow. In half an hour there sprung up out of the horizon cliffs, high, frowning and terrible, where the sea raged all day in and out among caves and passages, caverns and tunnels, and where was safe harbourage for an hundred thousand otters.

"There!" said the seal at last, backing water and sitting up on his tail in the mouth of a vast cavern. "Here thou mayest live safely, for

no man can follow thee here, and there are fish enough for all and to spare."

Unrest gazed around at the upflung heights, and watched the swell rising and falling tumultuously in and out of the caverns, with joy. He marked the dozens of handy caves just above high-water mark, where an otter might make an ideal home, and he saw the delightful sloping smooth slabs of rock where he might toboggan into the sea—as otters love to do—by the hours together, without fear of sitting down on a trap and never getting up again.

"What reward dost ask for this kindness—thou with the gentle eyes?" he asked at last.

"This," said the seal. "That thou and all thy kind coming after thee shall give us warning when men come in boats with clubs to corner us in the caverns. They will not come for thee—only for us, when we sleep; and thou, it is said, never sleep and never rest."

"It is a compact," cried both otters together, in one shrill, echoing, fierce whistle. "Take note, O gulls. Take note, O sea-birds—cormorant and puffin, guillemot and shag. Take note, O haunters of the cliffs, O 'Watchers of the Sea.' A compact! A compact!"

And all the sea-birds that lived high up on the dizzy ledges rose with a roar of wings in one vast cloud, shrieking wildly in chorus:

"A compact it is! By wind and wave. By

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storm and calm. By spray, and brine, and foam. May the sea give him to the hungry rocks who breaks this compact."

And that is the story of how the otters came to live by the sea cliffs.

THE BLACK SHADOW



HE Black Shadow started life as a receiver of stolen goods. They called him the Shadow because wherever it fell there was sure to be trouble. Later he took to stealing the goods for himself. Thus he gained much knowledge of men and things—knowledge of the seamy side, and though young, as men count years, he was old in cunning.

He made no secret of his calling; indeed, lest there should be any mistake in the matter, he wore a black livery, black as the sins he committed. In short, he was a crow, an American crow, and if there is any better imitation of a devil I do not know it.

Fate and a net transferred him from America to England, there to grace a fine aviary—it covered a quarter of an acre—the property of a rich American gentleman who conceived the notion of housing upon his estate most of the species of birds that haunted his native country.

The Shadow's sojourn in the aviary was short and disgraceful. It lasted exactly twenty-

four hours, at the end of which time his new master hurled him forth into a hard and pitiless world to carry on his devilries there. And it was about time. The other birds in that aviary were beginning to look sad and worried. Moreover, they were not all there, several were missing. These had died suddenly, and had been buried—inside the Shadow.

Some six miles the Shadow flapped his heavy and startled way over the trim and trustful, clipped and careful English countryside. No bird could have been more amazed than he at so suddenly recovering his beloved freedom.

On an aged and bowed oak-tree he came to anchor. Close by, but out of range, was a wood. The green grass of the field at his feet was studded with patches of red-bronze, which, when they moved and the sunlight flashed off their backs, turned into pheasants.

Then, suddenly the trained eye of the bird narrowed and fixed. These pheasants were up to something, had some secret fear. Every now and then one would vanish, and would not return.

There were other birds in that place, too, partridges and pigeons, blackbirds, thrushes, and others of lesser breed. All had a secret to keep, and moved circumspectly with a great show of mystery. As a matter of fact, there was a big shoot going on at the other end of the

estate, and the birds had collected in this quiet corner till it was over.

Then came trouble. The blackbird, who had intrenched himself in a holly-bush at the end of the field, was the first to sight it. Blackbirds usually are, by the way. It came, a flash of black and white, an apparition with a long tail and a straight, strong beak which was never made for insect fare.

In a second the field was empty. It was as if nothing had ever been there. They appeared to have melted into vapour, all those birds, for he that came was a magpie. He might have been a hawk by the terror he created.

Not that those birds feared for themselves, they personally were safe from the black and white—or, more strictly, green and white—apparition. It was only the wounded who had cause for fear, those who had crept away from time to time and had not returned.

The magpie did not wait, though how he knew where to go is a puzzle, unless he had been there before. Down to the hedge he slid, and to a partridge in the hedge. The partridge had a broken wing and leg, and found no pleasure at all in the sight of the magpie.

As for that black and white one, he was just starting to make a meal when there fell across him a shadow. It seemed to put out the gleam of his white-splashed livery, to eclipse him.

Then he looked up and beheld the crow "treading air," so to speak, above him.

The magpie did not wait to argue the point—one does not, if one is a smaller bird, argue the point with a gentleman like the Shadow. He retired to a neighbouring tree, where he sat and used abusive language, while the crow dealt with that partridge. That is to say, the wounded one went the way of many before him; the Shadow was no bungler at such jobs.

Hullo! What was wrong with that little fire-eater in the holly-bush, and why had the magpie suddenly ceased using foul language? The Shadow lifted slowly upwards on heavy, sable wings. He was just going to see if all were—oh, horrors!

There was a man, and he carried something which gleamed, and he was—this was where the shoe pinched—only forty yards away.

After that there was a jet of flame, and a report that seemed to knock the natural tranquillity of the place all to little pieces. It seemed also to have literally burst pigeons upwards out of the wood, and to hurl them into space. It scattered finches out of the hedges as dew is scattered from a bough that is shaken at early morn. And it conjured up an eruption of bronze bodies from the spots where the pheasants gathered thick, and sent them into apparent hysterics.

But the one thing it was meant to do it did not do, it did not stop the Shadow.

He—this rascally Shadow—retired with quite surprising swiftness. He sought the back-ground, in fact, at dramatic speed. Not all of him went thus, indeed, for there were certain feathers that remained as a memento, but all of him went that mattered. And the language used by that man—he was a keeper—would have made a bargee's hair curl.

Then the silence closed down again, as the sea closes over a sinking ship, and all was as it had been. Only the brown and the black feathers remained as evidence of the murder.

Towards evening the crow came by the light of a blood-red sun, to a land of damp and desolation, a dreary and dreadful place, where the lone wind wandered for ever, perpetually trying to recover its lost prestige among the reeds. There was no firm ground in this place, only water, and grass growing in water, and mud—plenty of mud. This was the land of the marshes—the lone, melancholy marshes—a fit retreat for such as he.

Coots flicked about on the surface of the open reaches making uncanny noises. Duck—mallard, widgeon, and pochard—drew straight lines athwart the sky, and everywhere the evening hush was broken by the mocking, wailing laughter of the gulls.

Then, quite suddenly, a raw, red flame licked out and back again, like the tongue of a snake, the air was rent and shaken by an appalling thunder, and all the water seemed to get up and flap about. The Shadow was enveloped and borne back in a mighty rush of stampeded water-fowl; of sweeping wings; of crazed cries.

A curlew almost charged into him blindly, seeking to escape. A golden plover, mad with fear, nearly knocked him sideways, and some other bird, that he did not see, as nearly knocked him back again.

The Shadow's first action was to bolt into space with the others. It was the wild creature's impulse—the natural one. Later, the sight of many wounded birds caught his eye, and he slackened speed. Evidently, somewhere in the gathering mist, a man had fired a gun. That it was a punt-gun he did not know or care, but, anyway, he was out of range now, and something might be made out of those wounded birds.

From what he judged to be a safe distance, he watched a black dog swimming hither and thither, gathering in the slain. But the fallen birds were many, and there was only one dog, and in the end master and beast retired into the dusk.

Then the Shadow came loafing back. He appeared to be looking at nothing in particular. But he was wondering where on earth or under

it that wild duck might be, which he saw swimming away apparently very much troubled with shots inside him.

The Shadow dawdled about on slow, flapping wings, while the coots came out again and called him names, and a parcel of black-headed gulls gathered round and jeered at him. He had very quick eyes, had this crow, for such work, and, after a bit, he made out a tiny channel dodging about among the reeds and mud.

The channel revealed two things, a big pike basking—or at least he made out he was basking—on the surface, and the duck floating about aimlessly like an abandoned sailing ship. It *was* abandoned—by the steersman called Life.

The Shadow settled on the mud with a great show of caution, whilst the gulls left off jeering and craned their necks to see what was going to happen next. They, too, had what might be termed a working interest in that duck. Gulls are always waiters and watchers upon chance—that is what makes them different from all other birds, who create their chances, and hunt for them diligently.

The Shadow waded into the channel. He was not by profession a wader—he left that for the gulls—but upon occasion he could paddle. Seizing hold of one of the dead duck's limp wings—being a crow you may be sure he took

a good hold—he began to haul his prize ashore, to the accompaniment of a running fire of comments from the assembled gulls.

No one had been taking particular notice of the basking pike up to that time. Therefore, no eyes had beheld him quietly sink out of sight, as an alligator sinks. Birds, as a rule, do not trouble their heads much about fish unless they want to eat them. Their lives are so far removed, you see.

Thus, the first that anybody knew about him was when the crow ceased towing and began hauling for all he was worth. Also he flapped his wings, and said things.

It was noticeable that the duck had suddenly become heavier, was lower in the water, just as if something were trying to drag it away beneath the surface, and, for once, things were exactly what they seemed. The pike had hold of one of that duck's legs, and when a pike takes hold it is time to lock out.

It was a case of pull bird, pull fish.

The Shadow dug his heels in the mud, and, leaning well back, hauled with all his might. The pike hung his dead weight on to the quarry, and backed-water vigorously. And the gulls, who hated all fish on principle, and saw visions of losing their share of the feast, danced about and seemed to be screaming encouragement to the crow.

Quite a little crowd of marsh folk had gathered by this time to see the fun. Other gulls appeared—as gulls do—from nowhere in particular. A short-eared owl had slid up, unnoted, and without sound, and sat watching quietly on his own behalf. A loon (great northern diver) sat swimming in circles, laughing the laugh of a maniac—and no bird is less of a fool than the loon—from time to time, as the struggle beat to and fro among the shadows.

And sundry evil, squat, gnome-like forms, uncannily magnified in the red glare, hopped from the reeds along the shore; anon they skipped, anon they gibbered, and always they were avoided like the plague by the other watchers. They were the great, cruel, arrogant brown rats of the marshes—and the short-eared owl would deal with them presently.

And all the time this mad tug-of-war continued. The Shadow was no coward, nor was he one to leave go, but it is questionable if he realised what manner of foe it was that he had on the other end of that duck. The gulls by now were all round him, splashing about on their coral legs, offering endless advice, and, what was more to the point, making furtive grabs at the unfortunate duck.

Perhaps it was the realisation of the added dangers created by this reinforcement of the



WARWICK
REYNOLDS

THE BLACK SHADOW

1831

It was a dark and stormy night, and the wind was howling
like a wild beast.

The old man, who was the only one left in the
house, was sitting in his armchair, looking out at the
dark night with a sad and thoughtful expression.

He was an old man, and his hair was white, but his
eyes were still bright and clear.

He was a man of many years, and he had seen
many things in his life.

He was a man of many years, and he had seen
many things in his life.

He was a man of many years, and he had seen
many things in his life.

He was a man of many years, and he had seen
many things in his life.

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many things in his life.

land-forces that induced the wolf of the depths, the pike, to act as he did.

The duck suddenly came away with a jerk, which almost landed crow and gulls upon their united backs; then followed a mighty swirl and a rush in the water. The Shadow had barely time to hurl himself into the air on frantically-beating wings in order to avoid being run down by a long, glistening, torpedo-shaped body that shot by beneath him in a smother of foam, snapping right and left with great jaws, and the most uninviting and villainous array of teeth that one ever clapped eyes on.

Unfortunately, the crow was not quick enough by the length of a feather. He stopped going very suddenly. He had to. The pike had hold of his tail.

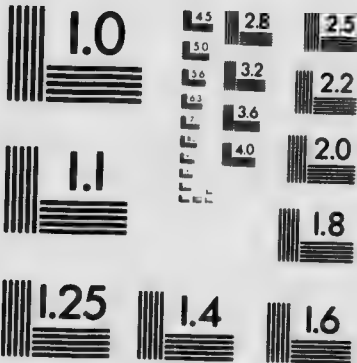
What followed is worthy of attention. It has already been said that the Shadow was no coward. That was the saving clause about him—that and his keen sense of humour. In a flash he realised that the pike was backing, still hanging fast to his tail, swiftly and with intent to drown him in the deeps. He did not wait; there was little time to wait, and none at all to think.

He struck with all the power of his black body, a lunging, plunging, savage blow of his hammer-like beak, straight at the large, cold, staring eye of the fish thing beneath him. And the blow went home.



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Then followed chaos—chaos, and all manner of unseemly happenings. The fish went mad, I think. So far as could be seen through the smother of foam he was quite devoid of reason. Moreover, when he turned it could be seen that he was devoid of something else, an eye. As was remarked above, the crow's blow went home.

He reared, and plunged, and rushed hither and yon, snapping, and foaming, and gnashing, and slashing, without purpose or meaning, or any sense of direction—or sense of anything at all for the matter of that. And the Shadow and the assembled company retired in haste up the mud, or on to posts, or stunted willows, whence they watched the evolutions of the wounded monster.

Then, quite suddenly, he started dashing round and round in a mad circle—like unto a whirligig beetle—till finally, with one huge plunge, he vanished from sight into the troubled, dark waters.

Thereafter the crow returned, and with him the riff-raff of the gull crowd, and together they hauled the duck out of the water and fed after their own fashion—which is scarcely a polite one.

The short-eared owl dropped without warning among the rats, and—fed after his fashion. And the ever hungry shore-crabs came up out of the green, still water, when it was all over and the diners had departed, and swept the

dinner-table clean, removed the scraps and the crumbs that remained, so to speak, as is their custom.

The Shadow slept that night on the stump of a willow of many score years. He was lulled to sleep by the water, which talked to itself continually, by the wailing complaint of the curlews, the "wee-uu" of passing widgeon, and the long-drawn, ventriloquial whistle of wandering golden plover.

Once a thing with shining eyes, and complaining to itself in a low key, clambered with some labour up that tree. It ran into the crow—purposely, I think—and woke him up. Thereafter it clambered down again in a hurry, and with a large, red gash on its flank. It was a rat, and it had suddenly, and painfully, come to the conclusion that live crows are *not* good to eat.

At the first pale hint of dawn the Shadow awoke. He took one good survey of the world, and then stiffened suddenly from head to foot. He became, as it were, a black image, frozen, not by the bitter cold of the dawn wind, but by something altogether different. There, motionless upon the steely, glittering water, and not twenty yards away, rode a long, evil-looking gunning-punt, with a lanky, lean man, a jet-black dog, and a more lanky and more lean punt-gun nosing over the bows.

The Shadow sat very still. I doubt if he had ever been quite so motionless in all his life, for he had seen what punt-guns could do the evening before.

There was a babble of many creatures talking one to the other, not far off in the mist that hung low over the water to the right, and man, and dog, and gun were watching this. He could hear plainly the chatty "grog-grog-grog" and "sib-sib-sib" of wild geese at feed, and the more impatient remarks of wild duck. Therefore, since his silent motionlessness had saved him from discovery up till then, he deemed it wise to continue the manoeuvre until further orders.

There was a pause, during which the mist lifted very, very slowly, and the man sank in the punt as slowly as the mist rose. Out of the nothing that was ahead grew a confused blotch, which may or may not have been wild duck and geese.

Then the Shadow fell backwards off his perch and flew. There was cause for his fleeing. In fact, he had received the further orders. The gun had gone off, and it might have been a volcano by the noise and confusion it made.

Later, when it was all over, he returned, and hunted for the remains. Searched for what the dog had left, and the gulls, remembering the

previous evening's adventure, gathered, as a crowd in a London street gathers.

There must have been something wrong with that dog. He was a black fraud. Out of a reed tangle the Shadow dragged a dead widgeon. Up a side channel he unearthed a wounded teal. Shrinking coyly up a drain—or "bunny," as drains are called in these parts—he happened on a mallard-drake, in difficulties, and mud, and, greatest find of all in a jungle of reeds, a wild goose.

It was not dead, that goose, but it was not feeling well, you understand. It suffered from an overdose of lead in its interior. The Shadow liked goose, but a goose dead, and a goose living was a different thing—the difference of a vigorous beak, and wings, that could break a crow's neck if that crow were not careful.

The Shadow sat down by the big bird, and cocking his head on one side—as is the custom of the crow tribe—considered.

The cold, glassy water—water always is glassy over mud—sobbed in an undertone at his feet. Overhead, the gulls wheeled, and rocked, and returned again, and, close at hand, ruby eyes peered at him from among the ranked reeds and made sounds—animal sounds—which were the vocal efforts of a water-rail, that looks more like a feathered rat than anything else.

When the spirit of that goose had departed

from him—which it did quite suddenly, when he attempted to beat at the crow with his wings—he floated out a little upon the water. The Shadow waded in as before, and hauled his prize back. Then the unexpected happened.

He had been so intent upon his capture, that only at the moment of his triumph did the Shadow become aware of a strange happening.

The gulls had gone. The water-rail had ceased using abusive language. No coot shrieked at him from the reed fastnesses, and even the rats, that were always there or thereabouts, had invited themselves into concealment. No sound broke the sudden silence. No living creatures moved. In the reeds, above, below, all round there was nothing—nothing but the eternal sobbing of the water on mud, like the muffled sobbing of a child in its sleep.

He stood alone, the Shadow, a solitary, black figure on the dappled mud, beside a limp, bedraggled, disarranged corpse of a goose. And, in a flash, he guessed that death was afoot. He knew the wild—who better; the wild that waits, and watches, and pries. He knew also the cruel falling away of the wild creatures—as a wave falls back from the shore—deserting any comrade at the approach of death.

Yet it was by chance that he glanced upwards, and instantly his eyes changed. Thousands of feet up, lost, and seen, and lost again

among the clouds, floated two lines—they looked no more. As the captain of a "merchantman" in the old days knew the cut of a pirate schooner, so did he recognise the cut of those lines; the rakish, slashing, dashing cut of birds of prey. He required no telling. He knew, and knowing, rose on slow wings.

Down they came, those vast-winged, feathered freebooters. Down in ample, graceful circles, in grand curves, and long, easy drives, and alone in all that space rose one lone, black speck to meet them. He, at least, was no coward—thief, murderer, slayer of wounded, if you will; ghoul, if you must; black and cunning villain, if it please you; but not a coward, not that.

They were buzzards, these birds, huge, giant hawks, that flew like an eagle, and could pass for such at a distance—but not at a pinch. It was where the fighting came in that they were found out. They were not eagles, nor ever could be—at a pinch they failed. Their heart was the heart of a rabbit.

The crow met them. He looked absurdly small beside these mighty-clawed, mighty-winged fliers. There was a battle of sorts. One buzzard felt the Shadow's beak, the other saw it strike, and together they fled, mewing plaintively, empty and disappointed, back to their realms of space.

A spear of flame shot suddenly upwards

from the reed-bed beside the dead goose. A crashing, blasting report followed, and the Shadow, returning triumphant, spun clean over in mid-air, and fell headlong. It was the punt-gunner, who had returned with another and a better dog, and who had thus surprised the crow—at his work.

The Shadow announced his arrival with a cascading, tumultuous splash. He was quite dead, I think, and——

The end is hard to believe, yet the punt-gunner positively asserts that, as the Shadow lay there floating on the surface, there came a mighty swirl. Then, before he, the gunner, could cry "Murder!" a head crowned the swirl, an ugly, great head with a long snout, the head of a pike. There was a snap, a rush of seething water, and—nothing. Head, and crow, and all had gone together. The Shadow was not. One moment he floated, the next he was an evil memory. But—and here the punt-gunner gets angry if you smile—the gunner is absolutely emphatic in his assertion that the pike *had only one eye*. Who knows?

" . . . The ways of Nature are strange. She is very quiet, patient as death itself. She holds her hand for years—sometimes for a generation—but she strikes at last."

THE ODD BIRD OUT

"Let him take who has the power, and let him keep who can."

HE sat alone, dejected, out at heels, morose, with that general untidy looseness of feather which seems to mark the rook off from all other birds. He was the odd bird out. He always had been, and yet I cannot tell why. No man, apparently, can explain why there always, or nearly always, is an odd bird out in a rookery. And yet he was not the weakest bird by any means. A grim necessity of shifting for himself had made him in strength, brain power, speed, and general knowledge of the world's ways, far fitter than most to be the master of a nest.

He rose slowly and described a circle on still wings, a circle whose centre was a young hen-bird glistening like carved jet in the sun. But he never reached her. Half a dozen other young "bloods" flung themselves upon him, and the crowd vanished into the horizon in a whirling welter of amazing flight. When they returned, each had a scar to show, a feather

lost; and he, coming last, chuckled because of it.

Later they all went to a field hazed with young wheat, and he fed with them, but apart. One noticed this as one noticed that he was more alert than the rest, keeping always near a tree which he could use as a lookout.

Every now and then he would bob up to his tree like not a fairy, but a fiend from a trap. He knew what was coming. He was not, you understand, in that tree by chance at all. The tree had the advantage of allowing the percher to see both sides of the hedge at once, and in seeing both sides of the hedge at once lies, perhaps, the whole essence of a rook's life. The crawler in human shape behind the baby leaves—as yet scarce more than a green film—was visible to him. So, also, the gleam which, so far as I know, has no duplicate, the bar-like gleam of gun-barrels.

He lifted and made noises at the sentinel—feeding flocks always have a sentinel, you know—but the sentinel was busily engaged in admiring a black and purple-shot damsel of his own. This was why our rook was high out of range when the flame stabbed twice through the pale green leaves, and three rooks collapsed in a heap where they stood, the rest flinging upwards in a terrified, sable cloud.

Now was his time. Needs but to dive,

cleaving the superfine air with a whistle of glistening wings; needs but to cut her out of the confusion, as a cowboy cuts out a steer from the thundering herd, to hustle her, turning when she turned, diving when she dived, rocketing when she rocketed, twisting when she twisted, swerving when she swerved—placing his body always between her and the clamouring flock, heading her away to the purple-brown hills that climbed up the horizon, and the steady tramp of breakers along their feet. It was all over in a minute, for I think, to tell the truth, that she helped him, or rather, to admit her truly feminine, we must whisper that she did not hinder him. She only made a show so to do, as surely was most correct.

As the valley fell away beneath them they let themselves down on a large arch to feed, for one must feed though all the world falls. To feed and make love between the beakfuls is good when the sun shines, and each strutting turn of the black body throws off shot flashes of purple and gold.

As evening drew on the ringing cheers of thrush and blackbird, missel-thrush, lark, robin, the crashing lay of the chaffinch, and the metallic grind of corn-buntings rang out more in the stillness, filling all the soft mid-'twixt hill and hill; the weird bark of the hooping long-eared owl was heard; drab and quivering

moths drifted up the hedges, and, just at sunset, a litter of fox-cubs came to stare at the lovers from the edge of a wood.

Then they went home, and that was the defeat. They had to go home. A rook must go home, for he is not like other birds; all the world is not home to him as to them. He is cursed with the first faint glimmerings of civilisation, and tied beak and claw to the rookery. Were he to leave it he would die, I think.

Nevertheless, they made a compromise and roosted in an elm about a hundred yards away from the main city of the black republic, and for their pairs spent a sleepless night of terrors, at a loneliness they could not understand.

With dawn came the lovers—she seemed to be plentifully supplied with them—of our rook's new mate. But they were foolish enough to come one by one, and our rook turned and rent them singly, and by the time the sun had risen a sorely-battered, but proud, black spectre had made good his bid for a wife. But he forgot—or did he ever know?—that dread, unfailing law of nature, and that other of the black republic which forbids the building of a rook's nest outside the city boundary.

The business of nest-building is not to be described, because no man knows how it is done.

All that day our rooks spent in flying about the brilliant spring sky with sticks.

Our rook, returning from a foray, became aware of a riot ahead. It was as if rook-shooting had begun months too early, only there were no reports. He hurried; the regular oaring of those broad wings quickened; he suspected an elopement of his mate. And he found chaos.

The whole of the black republic had betaken itself *en masse* to the upper air, where, be it noted, it took jolly good care to stay, shouting defiance down to where—oh, horrors!—his mate was engaged in mortal combat with other rooks. No, they were not other rooks, though they looked like them at first glance. They were crows—carrion crows—the same being a heavier, bulkier bird, more thick-set, with a beak better fashioned for murder, a courage corresponding.

Our rook arrived in the shape of a twisted black streak dropping earthwards, dropping to a losing fight, and he knew it. The hen-bird, it would seem, had been set upon by the black pirates while carrying away a piece of meat, and in fleeing home had made the mistake of sticking to the meat.

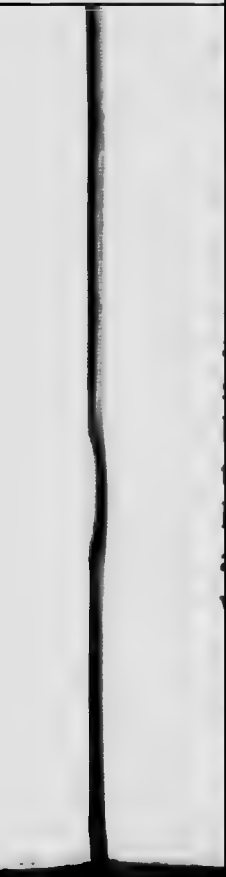
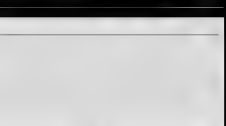
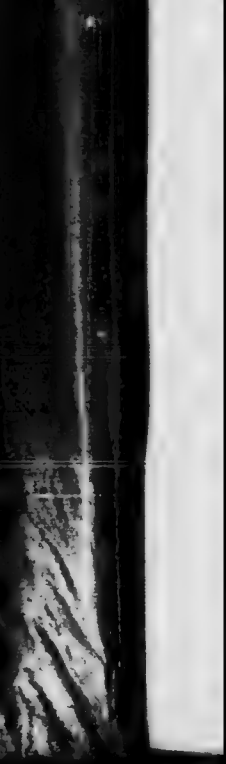
The struggle that followed was remarkable for an exhibition of aerial acrobatics, and a striking display of wing conquest over air which



though now they know when the time is ripe is a secret they keep. Our rook flew to the right, and alone. It pleased him well, this sea-side ramble. He foresaw, in the many skirmishes which such an outing always produces 'twixt rooks and gulls, something more than a working chance of a fresh elopement.

The wind was high, and flight by no means easy. The flock was continually scattering, each bird ducking and diving to obtain the best "slant" of breeze that he could for himself, and twice the odd bird out almost succeeded in "cutting out" his annoying mate.

It was not, however, till they had—he it was whose keen eyes found it—discovered a dead





not keep skating about that river at the speed apparently of an electric flash for ever. Even a trout has its limits. And in the end they cornered him, those minks—cornered him in a hollow beneath an old willow and slew him with great swiftness. Then they removed to the bank and sat down just above the reach of the whispering water, to dine.

Now, when the minks were about half-way through their repast, a chain of bubbles began somewhere in the blackness, about some tangled roots on the opposite bank, and shot across stream at them in a little, seething line.

Next instant bounced up a head from the current; a flat, sleek, smooth head with enormous whiskers, and it dripped. For a moment it regarded them with little eyes cruel as their own, eyes which reddened with anger in the pale green moonlight. Then it sank; and from first to last it never said a word.

Followed a huge swirl, as if a very big fish were in a hurry below, and after the swirl the straight, scrambling spray-covered charge of a long, low, glistening body.

The old male mink shot clean up in the air as this unexpected horror tore up from the water beneath him. The female mink side-twisted to one side with incredible speed.

There was next to no time to think, and

rather less time to act. The male mink came down again—he was chattering and swearing abominably—plump on the creature's back; not because he wanted to, but because he couldn't help himself. And where he fell he buried his gleaming fangs; for although the mink may be many un-nice things—and he smells appallingly—he is no coward.

This charging, silent foe was a soured, rough old dog-otter—not a pleasant enemy by any manner of means. He may have been—including the tail—forty-two inches long; certainly not less; he looked more; and his agility would have shamed a cat.

Then they fought. How or in what manner exactly is not known. The water-voles who were watching cannot tell you the details even; and their beady eyes are quick enough. The owls could make nothing of it all. There was a whirl of long, low, snaky bodies, a smother of leaves, a flying tuft or so of fur, a flash here and there of white fangs, and all the time the terrifying stench given out by the minks hung on the air like oil on water. There was no getting away from it; it sickened even the watching wild folk.

All at once a water-vole, far up the bank, dived with a resounding warning "plop." Another nearer to hand followed suit, and then many more did likewise. A rabbit scuttled

frantically past, and an owl flapped silently and suddenly into the night.

Without sound, and without comment, all the wild folk that had gathered—or stopped by the way—to see the great fight were melting away in haste, melting before——

A twig snapped, almost like a pistol-shot, under the hollow, arched aisles of the dim, still trees, and instantly, as at the holding up of some unseen umpire's hand—the fight ceased.

So suddenly ended that battle that it pertained almost to magic. There was just a mighty, treble, instantaneous plunge, a three-fold spurt of upflung water, a surge, a swirl, and—nothing. Nothing but a man—a keeper—standing on the bank looking at a half-eaten trout, and listening to the lapping flop of the back-wash, and wondering what had happened, what manner of woodland tragedy this was that he had missed.

Later during the morning that followed he found the remains of five more fish picturesquely disposed along the bank of the river. The otters got blamed for that—how was this man to know about minks—and henceforth the otters were extremely unhappy because of the numbers of traps which they found, or which found them.

Next night the minks came sliding downstream abreast looking for trouble. It was a dark night, save at rare intervals when a gash

in the clouds let loose a cascade of pale green moonlight, which revealed all the black secrets of the night quite suddenly, and vanished again in an inky void. It needed no light, however, to give away the exact spot where some wild duck had business among the reeds. The birds were talking one to the other as if no such things as foes existed, as wild duck will all the world over.

The minks checked, and backed water. They tested the air and found that a fox was ambushed among some reeds to the right; also there was another smell, new to them, and two eyes like live coals, which were the property of a poaching cat. But there was no taint of otter; therein lay their chief concern. They had acquired a lively respect for otters as a class, by reason of sundry angry scars about their persons, as mementoes of the previous night's battle. Then the minks dived.

For a space after they had gone, so silently sunk to the depths, nothing happened. At least, nothing happened in the water. But out of the bushes along the bank crawled a shadow—the keeper. He marked down the wild duck by sound. He raised his gun, aiming, and waited for a moonlit interval. Nothing heard him come. It was too black to see him, and, being to leeward, nothing smelt him.

At last the moonlight came leaping over

the tree-tops and struck the water. It revealed two ducks and a drake. The keeper squinted along the barrels of his weapon—but he never fired. Something went wrong—not with the gun, but the ducks.

Two of the birds had gone—not flown away, you understand, but gone under—and the manner of their going was hardly what you might call in order. They did not go willingly—in fact, their protests startled the quiet night—but they went very swiftly. Moreover, they failed to return. Some thing or things would seem to have withdraw them, as it were; snatched them down into the depths without a sign or any warning at all. It was just a case of now you see them, now you don't.

Then the darkness shut down suddenly, just for all the world as if an extinguisher had put out the moon, and the duck that remained went away in a hurry on terror-driven, whirring wings.

The blackness of the minutes which immediately followed was the blackness of the pit, and the fox and the cat took advantage of it to evaporate into the woods without sound. Only the keeper remained—listening.

Soon there came a gurgle from under an inky smother of holly on the opposite bank; a gurgle and a dripping sound, as of something leaving the water. Followed a snarl and a

crunching noise, and the keeper swore. It was only the minks who had dived under the wild duck, grabbed each a leg, and—after drowning the quarry—retired to the fastness of the hollies to hold high carnival.

But, as has already been said, that keeper knew nothing about minks, and so next day there were more traps to entertain the otters, since the man put the murder down to their door.

Three hours later the minks were in difficulties again.

Hunting still down-stream, they had come upon an otter and had fled inland for a space. Not that they were afraid of the other beast—minks are not much troubled with fear of anything that walks—but because they saw no fun in getting mangled without reason.

Being in England they could not go far without striking a farm-house and yard. They saw it—a piled blotch of deeper blackness in the blackness of the night—and since they were cursed with the abiding curse of the weasel clan, which drives them curiously to prospect all strange things, they prospected this place. And the first thing they ran up against was a fox. They barged into him as they turned the angle of a wall, and thereafter ensued an argument.

The fox, being more scared than angry,

slashed one of them over the shoulder; it left a neat, long gash, that slash. Followed an infernal chattering, and the fox ran away with the female mink firmly pinned to the top of his shoulder, and the male undulating snake-like at his heels seeking a hold.

In a few minutes these two marauders—long, low, curving shadows, half-seen, half-guessed in the murky gloom—were back again.

They awoke a pig, which grunted suddenly and caused them to jump quite a yard with fright. They nosed into a manger, nearly terrifying its owner, a mare, out of her equine senses, and they ran over the cows' food mixed ready for the next day, and polluted it with their appalling smell beyond all hope of any sane animal eating it.

Later they fell in with the official cat of the place, and out again in about five seconds, because a cat is most fastidious over the matter of smells, and when it scented those minks it seemed within dangerous proximity of blowing up.

Finally they came to the barn, and the rats of the barn, and things happened.

All they saw of the interior from the hole through which their lithe forms had squirmed was an inky void, scented with the dry, comforting smell of corn, and peopled with tiny lights in pairs—always in pairs—which raced up and down in companies. They knew these

to be rats by the sound, and if anything were needed to make them more certain, by the smell.

Then the cat came—by pure chance of course, for she had no wish to encounter those minks again. Came she from the opposite end of the barn in the shape of two big, round orbs of green fire—she must have had some secret entrance of her own. And the rats went. At least there followed two seconds' pause, then all the eyes turned in the direction of the minks, where happened to be the largest exit.

It takes a plucky beast to stand up to the combined rush of a hundred or so scared and desperate rats. Probably the minks would have got out of the way if they could, but they would not run, and the rats were in a hurry. Result—chaos.

The rats, almost before they knew it, found themselves mixed up—packed in a stifling mass—in a deadly, dumb, shocking encounter with some beasts that chattered and fought like mad things and smelt appallingly. It was only a matter of thirty seconds, that battle, because the minks were shouldered aside by sheer force of numbers, as a wave shoulders aside boats, but it was a wicked enough fight while it lasted.

Then, almost before one knew it, came silence, and lo! most of the rats were gone.

I say most advisedly, because some there were who could not go—the minks and their beautifully polished fangs had seen 'to that. After that the cat went away also, because two chattering things with red eyes like tiny live coals, who were nearly mad with the lust of fighting, chased her from end to end of the barn, as she had never been chased before, and certainly hoped never to be again.

It was a quarter of an hour after the barn episode that these two wandering marauders—these minks—hit upon the fowl-house. It is wonderful, by the way, how night prowlers generally do finish up at the fowl-house; our friends found it by scent, I think. They were very careful, for, being on land, which was not their natural element, they were, if one may so term it, rather at sea.

A rat's hole gave them an entrance, and a rat coming out, holding an egg under his lower jaw and against his breast, gave them pause, but only for an instant. A rush, a squeal, and—the rat was past praying for. The egg, also, was soon only a shell. Next they turned to the fowls.

The air within was hot, and the smell was un-nice; but two fowls roosted on a low perch. That alone concerned the minks.

Followed a leap, a thud, a dry rustle of feathers, and a squawk; but it was none f

the minks' pleasure that the rest of the fowls should set up a small-sized riot. They fed within in a whirlwind of feathers, whilst the inmates rushed about and screamed with that helpless *abandon* peculiar to fowls and sheep. They killed two fowls, but touched only one, for someone came, and they went away in a hurry; they had to, for the someone brought dogs to the number of three.

Next morning the farmer put it all down to the fox, who suffered accordingly for a felony he had not—for once—committed.

Gliding down through the woods as dawn flecked the blue-black sky with the steel-cold grey, the minks sighted the otter. He was returning from some blood raids of his own. An expedition which cannot have been successful, for his temper was awful, and he gave chase.

He was, however, even more at sea on land than the minks. They, at least, undulated in more or less graceful curves; he shambled. But they all three got along at fair speed. You see, the otter's feet were webbed completely; the minks' only partially so. This may make a balance in favour of the otter in the water, but the opposite on land.

The minks did not wait. They flew. Down a beaten track—a game track—went they; and the otter whistled at their heels in disgust at the stench they left behind.

At the bank the track stopped at a "slide," such a chute as is used by all otters time after time for generations. Here the minks swerved. They had no love—no innate hankering—for tobogganning as the otters have. They preferred to take the water in a less dramatic way farther along the bank.

Then came the otter, angry, puffed, and seeking a fight. Down the "slide" went he. Under the water his long form vanished in a spurt of upflung spray. And under the water he stayed. There was certainly a little foam, a great swirling.

After a bit bubbles appeared, but not the otter. He was in a trap, which had been placed, with cruel cunning, under the surface at the bottom of the "slide." It was indeed the irony of Fate that he should be killed, drowned in his natural element—his realm—but Fate has no conscience that way.

Now, it is a curious fact that no man killed those minks—or even saw them from first to last—and after the otter had gone there was not a beast left powerful enough to accomplish the double slaughter. Yet next evening there they lay, both together, side by side, on the bank of the river, red-bronze figures on blood-splashed grass by reason of the setting sun—and they were quite dead. Stiff, cold, and horribly still, with that look of eternal un-

concern on their grim, almost diabolically cruel faces, which is worn by all the lifeless ones, and by them alone.

There were two neat little round punctures on the near fore-foot of each mink—and there was a little red adder (not the brown, but the more venomous and rarer red variety) torn to shreds under a holly bush fifty yards away. What he may, or may not have known of the matter he cannot say, but the little, beady-eyed water-voles, who peep, and peep, and bandy all the gossip up and down the river-side, could speak the truth about it if they were not so shy, I guess.

THE RETURN



H-E-I-U-O-OGH-H-H!" went the wind, sweeping in swift, savage rushes over the sand-hills.

"Patter-patter-patter. Tre-tre-tre!" sang the finely-powdered dry sand, drifting like flung carpets before the wind over the sand-hills, and piling up in a ceaseless whispering shroud among the spiky marra...s.

"Aargh-ow-oo-*romp*. She-e-e-e!" thundered and snarled the waves as they flung themselves, reckless and savage, in a chaos of boiling white welter against the rampart of humped pebbles that made the beach.

"He-oh!" rang out the cold wild call of a herring gull—clear as a bugle note—as the bird himself, surrendering to the blast, came shooting on still wings down-wind along the shore, like a flashing white projectile, only to fling up, tack, come about, and begin slowly working up-wind again just above the awful chaldron back of the breaking waves, as he had been doing ever since the blood-red dawn ushered in a mad day.

He stopped suddenly, lifted quickly—as if

a scornful wave had flung up a white arm and tossed him into the air—and, tumbling head-long, went skating down the trough of one long, sullen swell, and over its green-barrelled back. This he did with such amazing speed, and so close behind a blue-grey bird, which had suddenly appeared, flying almost on the water, from out the wet distance away to sea, that it seemed for a second as if the two were one, moved by one impulse, stirred and driven by a single mind.

But in a moment the big gull was back again, all alone, and had taken up once more, as if nothing had happened, that ceaseless, cruel, unwearying sentry-go which rings our wild coasts almost without a break from sun up to sun down, and from spring to spring, and is the abiding horror and fear of every migratory bird visiting or leaving our islands—the terrible White Patrol of the gulls. Up-wind, close to the waves, with heavily flapping wings, and slowly, he beat his way till nearly out of sight. Then, round, and on still vans, came shooting down-wind like a silver meteor, only to turn at the place where he originally started and repeat the process endlessly. And to the south of him, within field-glass range, was another, doing exactly the same thing. And to the north of him along the shore, also within field-glass range, was a third, acting likewise.

And why? Ask the bird he had just chased, the bird exhausted almost unto heart failure, who had come in from over the smudged, cold seascape, and gone in-shore above the wave-like sand-hills. He knew. He could see, what was quick enough to deceive the human eye, *had* seen the cruel, long beak of the gull, with its claw-like tip, and blood-patch at end, strike, quick and slanting, and murderous, so close past the bird's head that the very feather-shanks thereon were broken in its path. Thus the White Patrol. It might be the same with a dead kitten, a tallow candle, a stranded, pathetic, splashing baby porpoise, or—? Oh! what odds? They are there, anyway, and in being there are very beautiful to behold, and, incidentally, a marvellous exposition on the art of flying to boot.

But he, the blue-grey one, the traveller from out the wet skyline—what of him? Directly he had shaken off the gull and had topped the first of the golden sand-dunes, he sank into the hollow behind. He settled. That is to say, he landed on his off-shoulder and a pebble, rolled once over, and stood up. Then he toppled suddenly, and sat down in haste. Yet he was not wounded; let there be no mistake about that. This unsettled way of settling simply meant that he had left Germany, or Norway, or Russia, or somewhere

or other, on the previous afternoon, calculating—he must have calculated, else why did he do it?—to reach our, so-called, hospitable shore at dawn, before the lazy gulls were on their everlasting “mooch.” Not that he was afraid of the gulls exactly, he who feared neither man, nor beast, nor bird, nor devil, and had a fine haughty contempt for all four. He just knew that if, as had happened, a contrary wind sprang up in mid-North Sea, he would be in no condition to argue with gulls by the time he reached shore: “any shore alive, if not dry.”

For some moments it seemed as if the palpitations of his heart would burst the whole frail contraption of ruffled feathers and tight, drum-like skin asunder. And very pathetic he looked, too, as he sprawled there, one short, sharp wing trailing in the sand; the steel-blue back of him all sand-spattered; the beautiful, long, greyish-brown tail, with its fine bold black bars, half buried in drifting particles, and his long yellow legs straddled out anyhow. Yes, very pathetic he appeared until you viewed his head, and then—you put your hand over your mouth. No pathos there in that haughty, cruel, aloof, sheathed glance, that royal, insolent scowl from those amber eyes; nor in the sleek, smooth, well-bred, small, and fighting head, and least of

all in the neat but fendishly sharp blue beak, hooked, and curving from the base, so that its stiletto tip pointed down to the nearly white, narrow cross-barred breast of its owner. No, there isn't much of the pathetic about the head of a full-grown male sparrow-hawk. It's just about the most aristocratic and perfectly designed head of a fighter that you ever clapped eyes upon.

Nor was he wounded, as has been already stated, this tired bird of prey, and everything would be all right soon, if— Ah! The clean, neat head shut, all at once, down, telescope fashion, into the shoulders; the well-formed body tightened suddenly, growing smaller; the wings shut with a crisp snap, and the yellow-rimmed, amber eyes blinked twice and were still—hard and still. There was something at the mouth of that hole under that buckthorn there a few yards away. And it had eyes, also, but they were black eyes, and amazingly beady. In the shadow the outlines of a receding, shark-like face showed dimly. One felt that the owner thereof was evil and of a great cruelty.

When you have been bred and reared in a world where there is no mercy, you know where you are. The sparrow-hawk knew where he was, and had no delusions. Nor had the head in the hole. He, too, knew that you

kill or are killed in the wild, the one being as likely as the other. So hunted the men of the old days, and were not the less men for it either.

He came out, that shark-faced one, and stood revealed as a shore-rat, but—well, if you have not lived for days and nights, lying still as a pebble beside the tide-line, or the estuary, half through a cold night, you can never know, never guess, all that the disreputable, dreaded shore-rat is to the haunters of those parts.

Apparently the mange-pocked, tooth-scarred, objectionable one, with the hole bitten out of one ear—like a chewed biscuit, it was—had no interest in the hawk at all—*could* not have any if he tried. Rubbish! That was a blind, a rat-trick to put the enemy off his guard.

You see him, a hunched brown blot against the sand, broadside on, gnawing thoughtfully at something—seed of marram or grain of sea-barley perhaps—held in his fore-paws doubled up like tiny pink hands—hands of a gnome. Then you don't.

In a flash he had whipped round, darted like lightning—in a series of long-hind-legged hops—towards the hawk, turned at the last moment, and *absolutely without hesitation or pause*—thus explaining one of the meanings of, and uses for, the long balancing tail—and re-





turned to his hole again—all in one movement, and all at unbroken speed. It was rather a remarkable manœuvre, and, unless he had imagined the hawk to be nearer death than he was, and discovered the blunder only at the last moment, quite a useless one apparently. But, on the other hand, there could be no denying the presence of the little, round, flat, furry head, silhouetted on the top of the nearest sand-hill, and peering down with business-like interest upon the scene below. It had not been there before. The rat must have seen it bob up there after he had started on his rush. That may explain the manœuvre. It does not explain how he was able to continue the reversed evolution without a pause; to show, that is, not the slightest hint of check or hesitation from first to last.

Anyway, the rat was gone, and the flat, furry head wasn't, and the head was the property of a full-grown dog-stoat, and the ways and means of the rat were sweet and lamb-like in comparison to the business methods of friend stoat, the latter's bright eyes, and neat white shirt-front, and pretty, clean air notwithstanding. It was just the difference of the cut-throat footpad and the born duellist—that was all. A matter of only a greater certainty, if a cleaner blade.

The hawk drew his legs well under pre-

paratory to turning over upon his back, and, with beak and claw, making the best fight he could of it. This was not the first stoat he had met. The last one was of immature age and had gone down the hawk's throat, but even he had nearly succeeded in severing the winged hunter's useful jugular vein before he was dropped incontinently a couple of hundred feet to the earth below as a finishing touch. This, however, was a different matter. The tables were a bit turned now.

A flock of larks passed chortling above them. They had been "coasting" up from the south for days, and would touch Denmark before another sun was up perhaps. A snow-bunting, looking fearfully out of place, gave out his odd little call-note as he followed in the train of the larks. A flock of ringed plover, moving as one bird, their white breasts showing plainly, flashed from skyline to skyline on long hooked wings. And the stoat watched them all. Then turning, with that extraordinary quick, bright, vivacious manner of moving peculiar to stoats, he started down the sand-dune towards the hawk.

There was no hurry. At an easy gallop came he—that odd sidelong gallop, which is the caste mark of all the weasels and stoats, and is the outcome of having very long body and very short legs. He "rippled" down, in

a manner like a snake; snaky, too, was the long, graceful neck, and nearly as cruel as a snake's the light in his eyes, blood-red now, it seemed, but that may have been a trick of the light only.

The sparrow-hawk waited until the last moment. Whether he felt sure that he had hunted his last hunt, or not, I do not know, for he never said. Indeed, he said nothing at all, and continued to say nothing till the stoat—you could see the gleam of the little rapier-sharp fangs of him now—was within a foot. Then he kicked himself over on his back ready for the grapple, and the stoat—the stoat? Oh, he swerved and continued to swerve, till, not checking the same leisurely, sidelong gallop for one instant, he vanished round the splayed-out foot of the next sand-hill. It was rather a tame ending to a drama, and foolish, but—what would you? Nature does not play to an audience, and would care little if she did. She keeps the meaning of her plots to herself, or, at most, you are at liberty to find them out if you can. Mostly you can't, and make out you are bored in consequence. Generally great things are happening in Nature when nothing appears to be doing, and there may be a fearful hubbub and to-do, and an apparently excited massing of actors, when nothing is toward.

The hawk showed neither surprise nor

pleasure—being a bird, he wouldn't—but snicked his head round till the beak was where the back of his poll should be—an uncanny trick affected by birds of prey—and watched two inches of the top of a man's cap bobbing up and down on the hither side of a sand-ridge not a dozen yards away. The owner was walking along the slope on the other side. Had he chosen to walk two feet higher he must have seen the hawk, and—well, he was a professional bird-catcher, you know. Had he walked a foot lower the stoat would not have seen him, and the sparrow-hawk might have ceased to live in consequence, for the stoat might have wounded him at the least, and a wound is, in nine cases out of ten, as good as a death-blow where a bird is concerned. But the man chose to walk just where he did choose to walk, and, by the same token, the hawk was saved. That's fate.

The keen amber eyes blinked in their yellow sockets as the aerial hunter watched the cap bobbing up and down on its way till it vanished.

The wind still hurtled overhead in fierce flurries, the sand still continued to patter along, and behind it all, one vast dry menacing roar, the sea still continued to grumble at the shore, and the hawk still continued to squat on, motionless.

Then, suddenly, at last he stood up—was erect. He ruffled his feathers; shook himself,

and the dry sand flew from off his plumage in a tiny shower; scratched his smooth, keen head with one long, black-clawed toe; straightened out one lean yellow leg and one short hard wing behind him, with a harsh rasping of feathers, bent over suddenly and "sharpened" his beak on a stone—and that same was a thrushes' anvil, as the scattered broken snails' shells attested—straightened up, and shut in his feathers with a sharp swish till he became nearly half his former size—trim, compact, ready, absolutely adequate.

For a moment the bird frowned full at the rat's hole under the buckthorn, but if the rat was still there he made no sign. He knew better. This hawk was a very different hawk to the one he had plotted to murder many minutes ago. For a moment more he scowled at the corner of the sand-dune where the stoat had vanished, but if Mr. Stoat was there he did not say so, nor show so much as a long whisker. He may have known also that the hawk was now recovered, both master of himself and the situation. Then, in a breath, he was up, was adrift, buoyant, wonderful, his short wings beating, his long tail held down at an odd, characteristic, drooping angle. He lifted, lifted till he came level with the wind whooping and shrieking above from dune-top to dune-top, and—pff! He was gone—had

canted, had heeled nearly clean over, and shot down-wind like unto a miniature meteorite. No wonder friend rat and friend stoat had kept silent, by Jove! This bird that played forked lightning to the gale's thunder was, in the air, no proposition to trifle with, whatever he might have been when exhausted and on the ground.

About two and a half minutes later the bird-catcher, crouched in a hollow half a mile away watching his ready-set nets and the decoy—the little feathered Judas—in front of them that was to call the northward-bound linnets and twites to their doom, was aware of something whistling past his ears. It was as if the spirit, or djinn, or ghoul, or thing which kept the keys of the mystery of the dunes, had aimed a sword at his neck. It sounded just like that, and it looked like a flickering steel-blue streak. But it was the decoy bird that was aimed at, and the decoy whose death shriek, thin, high, and pathetic, pierced the storm. The sparrow-hawk had got him all right enough, there could be no doubt about that. The bird-catcher could see the shape of the big hawk flapping on the ground. And he swore, swore hard, stretching forward his hand to pull the cord that would turn the big nets over on themselves in a second, and ensnare the proud bird of prey, quicker than you could have cried "Murder!" almost.

In doing this, however, the man's fingers missed the cord—he really ought to have been holding it, I fancy—by a quarter of an inch. He fumbled, though, and had it in an instant, and pulled. In an instant—yes, but an instant is a long time where wild things are concerned. The hawk's amazing eyes, which could not, or had not, picked the crouching, motionless figure of the man out in the gloom, saw, rather more than instantly, the moving hand.

There was a scuffle, a scramble, a flutter of stiff feathers, the big nets came over swiftly and as if by clockwork, and the man ran forward with more agility than one would have given him credit for, but there was no hawk under the nets. *He* was a quarter of a mile away, riding the storm like the son of Nimshi—a winner from death by half the length of his own short hooked beak.

Then night shut down with coming rain-clouds, and the hawk faded from sight.

The roar of the sea dropped with the dawning, the wind went down with the tide, and on a sudden things began to stand out of the darkness magnified. And of these things there was one that stood out more than the rest. An old and tottering post, upholding a board from which the action of wind-driven sand and rain and salt spray had long obliterated the warning that: "Trespassers will be prose-

cuted," stood almost on the very edge of the beach. But it was not the post that showed up, nor the board. It was the motionless, nearly white shape above—the barred breast of the roosting sparrow-hawk.

Now trees loved he, and thick, silent glades where no wind ever penetrated, and ruled, narrowing rides, and the roar of the gale over the oak hangers—such was his realm, and by these sights and sounds "was his being fulfilled." But being here, and overtaken by the night, foodless and treeless, he had had to make the old post do. Anything was better than roosting on the ground with its whispering sand and nameless crouching deaths.

As the light grew, though he did not move, those wonderful quick eyes of his took in everything. The odd little writings on the sand that the stiff, glaucous-hued glumes of the breeze-swayed marram and sea lyme grasses drew with their pointed fingers; the smudge of silver, seen and gone again, as the lean dawn-wind went rustling and sighing inland, lifting the leaves of a sea buckthorn so that they showed their silvery undersides as it passed; the quivering of the strange frosted, splayed spikes of the sea-holly; the wink and bob of the white tails of gambolling rabbits yonder where darkness still clung about the velvet furze; the scolding cry and rush of a rufous and green-black and

white sheldrake breaking from a rabbit hole and winging seaward; the halt, and the shoot, and the dive of some early gull; the vision of a white hook alternately revealed and eclipsed that marked the hind wing-margins of a swiftly passing redshank; the strange squat shape that walked swiftly and rat-like—not a bit toad-like—beneath him to its hole and was a natter-jack toad; and last of all, the thrush, busy among the rioting brambles, whose tap-tapping of some unhappy obdurate wood-snail upon a stone attracted the keen hawk's gaze to the boldly spotted breast of the songster.

The sparrow-hawk fell from his perch as if it had given way beneath him without due and proper warning. From thence to the spot where the thrush was, and over it, and beyond, always close to the ground, he raced as a cloud shadow races over the fields on a windy day. As he slid above the thrush one long yellow leg was seen to drop, the lancet-sharp black claws clutched—timed to a hundredth of a second—and—clutched air. The astute thrush had flattened himself into the ground as if by magic, and before the baffled slayer could turn, or stop, had dived slantwise among the writhing, clutching brambles, where no hawk ever hatched from egg dare follow him.

There was no checking in the hawk's flight, however. He seemed consumed with a feverish

desire to get on, to move, to hurry, to dash. It was as if he were under a ban that bid him to unceasingly race through the air at top speed—for aye. But here was no meteoric dart through the upper realms in the air, no toying with the winds at vast altitudes, no lightning dives through space out of the clouds, as with the dashing falcons. Such is not the way of the hawks. He seemed to be chained to the ground, following its contours with astonishing skill, now shooting up the slope of a dune, now diving down its hither side, now twisting and turning—always at eye-strained speed, in and out among the network of hollows at their feet.

They were really a very pretty little friendly party, grouped—all dainty browns and soft smoked whites, against the clean, fresh green—on the velvety carpet of the “putting green.” It was the “ninth hole,” and the billiard-table perfection of the turf did great credit to the golf secretary, whoever he might be, and they had all come there together to surprise the early worm if they could—one meadow pipit, and four skylarks. Then, before anyone could move, or even so much as cry out, it was as if something had been thrown, or bowled, or something, very quickly down the flank of the nearest sand-dune, across the lawn, and up the slope of the sand-hill opposite. There had been a whistling, as if

swords cleaved the air, and a single, agonised squeak in a high key. Then it was gone—in a flash. And it was as if it had been a hand wiping the lawn clean, for there was nothing alive left on the lawn after its passage, no living thing of any kind whatsoever. One skylark, he was stuck head first and palpitating in a marram tussock twenty yards away; another, she was flattened, wild-eyed, in the nearest “bunker,” and the other two were moving from that hole, north and south respectively, with little wings whirring at the utmost possible number of flaps per second. And the meadow pipit? Oh, he was being swiftly and scientifically *plucked* by the sparrow-hawk on the sand in the next hollow. He was quite dead, of course, that meadow pipit who had forgotten for a moment to keep quite such a good lookout behind him as he might have done. Perhaps he trusted to the larks. I don't know, and he can never tell me now.

A little later we find our sparrow-hawk more or less perched on a telegraph wire that kept company with a road that marched with the shore. The wires hummed all the time through their teeth, and the hawk bobbed and ducked all the time because the wind and the wires between them gave him a most uncertain hold. He was not happy, and he was still hungry—what's one meadow pipit more or less to a fully commissioned hawk on active service, anyway?

Moreover, he was made no happier by the fact that the flocks of larks, and pipits, and twites, and others who were continually coming up from the south-west and continually dwindling into the east—they belonged to northern Europe really and were going there as quickly as they could to nest, if the snow had yet melted, leaving behind their British tribes-folk already nesting—could see him bobbing about thus in that absurd fashion, and, cleaving to right and left, gave him wide berth.

It did not need, therefore, the appearance of five larger birds out of the south-west to create his final discomfort. These swerved at the sight of him neither to the right nor to the left, but came straight on, flying in a loose and scattered company with quick strokes of their rounded wings. They were fair-sized birds, larger than a blackbird but smaller than a pigeon or a turtle-dove. From time to time one or other of them let drop a sound something like a weak bird-scarer's rattle, and that proclaimed them. They were missel-thrushes, and, as all the world knows, the missel-thrush is the giant, as well as the termagant, of his tribe.

The hawk took no notice of them, or appeared to take none, with an indifference that was almost studied. He might have killed one, one would think, being still shockingly hungry. But—well, he didn't. Doubtless he had his

own good reasons, which are hidden entirely from us.

Nor did the big, boldly spotted thrushes seem to take any notice of the hawk. They would, if they persisted in their course, fly directly over him as he sat, balancing awkwardly and bobbing about on his swinging wire. And this they did.

The first four birds, flying in their peculiar way, with what appeared to be a series of quick, full strokes punctuated by short intervals of nearly, not quite, motionless quiverings, had already passed above, well above—quite fifteen feet—his head. And the fifth one was just directly over him, when, without the slightest warning, or reason given, this last bird, a big cock, three-quarter shut his wings and dropped like a pebble directly upon the hawk. He hit the amazed hawk bang in the middle of the back with a clean smack that could be heard ten yards away, knocking him head over heels off his perch, and then climbing the air again rapidly, flew hurriedly on after his fellows as if nothing had happened. As for the hawk, taken, one supposes, completely unawares, he appeared to be a good candidate for a bad fall and maybe a broken wing, but by some miraculous sleight of wing he recovered himself, righted, and swept up again to his wire, where he perched once more, bobbing absurdly as before, and with

about as much show of concern as you will see in the face of an average "dokey." Now what is one to say of such creatures?

Why did the missel-thrush, and that one alone out of all five, do that mad thing, apparently quite on the spur of the moment? Why did not the bold sparrow-hawk instantly and savagely annihilate him for his appalling cheek? And why, oh why, did they both do all these contradictory and exciting things with the expression and emotion of sphinxes, giving no explanation at all? But—well, there you have it. That's just the wild all over: the wild, which is three times as inscrutable as the East, and about one quarter as understandable. A man may spend a lifetime studying the habits of one single bird—if he survive the exposure—and think he has got that bird at his fingers' ends; then, at the last moment, the bird goes and does something that directly contradicts all its previous doings, and—the man dies hopelessly, with the feeling that he is no nearer the truth than when he began, and perhaps not quite so near.

For quite ten minutes the fine hawk sat like a piece of old grained oak carving insecurely hung up, while the sun shone steadily and gloriously, bewitching all things into beauty, and the crisp sea-breeze drummed through the telegraph wires and rustled the bending,

nodding sea-barley and the manna grasses; while the meadow pipits flickered vertically up from time to time—always at a safe distance from the hawk, be it mentioned—filling the air with their plaintive “See-ing! See-ing! See-ing!” as they hung and sank slowly on tremulous wings, like fairy parachutes; and the beautiful wheatears splashed little white paint smudges on the sunny sides of the dunes as they flirted their white rumps to the glare, and the gulls—their peculiar cat-calls coming down on the lap of the light breeze—rose and sank above the dull line of the pebble ridge a quarter of a mile away, resembling big flakes of silver confetti, and behind it all, filling earth and sky and body and soul, was the steady, melancholy, compelling drone of the magic sea.

Then, quite suddenly, the hawk slid down from his uncertain perch and darted away low over the waste. It is only saying that he was a bird to explain that he broke from statuesque immobility to fretful, high-pressure action without any kind of preliminary. One moment he might have been asleep; the next he was reeling the miles behind him as fast as any train.

He had, in fact, seen a wood, and woods were to him what hills are to the hillman, only a good deal more so. Perhaps he had seen the wood all the time, a low, squat smudge of black and blue-green on the edge of the sand-hills.

Perhaps he had only that instant spotted it. I cannot say. He went there, anyway, and, in the going, disturbed suddenly, and almost startled the senses out of, a resplendent green bird, with a blazing red top-knot, black eye-patches, and white eyes. It had ventured out about six hundred yards from the wood to depopulate an ants' nest of which it somehow had knowledge, and in that moment it wished it hadn't.

This was a biggish bird, much larger than any missel-thrush, and it had a beak like unto a good thick skewer, that looked as if it could easily go right through the hawk and come out on the other side.

"Yah! Yah! Yah!" it laughed with what seemed to be unseemly and maniacal mirth, but there was no laughter in its actions. It let out for the wood as if the devil himself were at its heels, and appeared to possess no delusions about the character of its disturber. The bird was a green woodpecker.

It was a short race, but one to make you hold your breath over, all the same. The woodpecker was not swift, but he got along: there was quickness. The hawk *was* swift, frankly and startlingly a racer. My word! how that bird moved. His short, hard wings seemed to literally twinkle. Nor did the odd characteristic pose of the long tail, which was held slightly

dropped as if he were perpetually about to perch, hide the extraordinary velocity of his dash.

A long start had the woodpecker, and he had not far to go. Once inside the wood, and the hawk could go hang so far as he was concerned. But the hawk seemed to fairly drink up the yards. It was as if the woodpecker was crawling by comparison.

Except for the frantic swish of the straining pinions there was no sound. Both birds raced in grim silence till the very last second, till the woodpecker was within four yards of sanctuary, till the long, lean, yellow right leg of the hawk dropped down and out, till the extra long middle claw—specially constructed for clutching forward in this peculiar form of stern chase—thrust forward its dagger talon, and in that instant the woodpecker screamed. He knew he was beaten.

And in that instant, too, two things happened almost together. Firstly, the hawk, without for a fraction of a second checking his sickening speed shot straight up in the air with spread tail and rigid wings, swished over sideways—on his back, I really believe—and streaked away at right angles along the edge of the wood, so instantaneously that the labouring eye was still puzzled with the impression of him on the eyeball actually after he was out of sight—that

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was the first thing. The second was a flick of flame—exactly like a fiery snake's tongue—flicking out and back down among the shadows that lived around the tree-trunks, and a thundering report that seemed to rip the silence of the woods up by its foundations and bring all clattering down about one's ears.

Then, a long time afterwards, a very long time afterwards it seemed, though 'twas but a few seconds, a deep voice said: "I or'ness my 'eart an' soul," twice distinctly, and moved off grumbling into the mystery of the sealed wood. That was Scarle, the gauger, and good right had he to say it. He had witnessed in that second a flash of light, which *he* could not appreciate for he would—if he lived to be a hundre

Of course the Hawk had seen the man, or maybe even only the flash of the gun, but how on earth, or off it, his eyes and brain and wings and tail had managed to put him together like a single electric spark, to execute the magic of more than instantaneous evasion, is one of those things which may have an explanation or may not, but I have not found

Later that day, when "noon was mending her twisted copper nose" you behold the sparrowhawk shooting up one of the "rides" in the wood. Anon he came to a corner, and went

round it on one wing and at anything you please up to sixty miles an hour. There is not much room for error in this sort of travelling. If you meet anything, an overhanging branch, for instance, you dodge, or—die. The one seems as likely as the other.

Of course the two cock chaffinches—all moss-green they looked from the hawk's point of view, about fifteen feet above them—did not know he was going to appear in that sudden fashion. How could they? They were tripping about on the short grass in that odd dainty little way of theirs, which I do not remember to have seen in any other birds, prospecting for food.

The next instant the hawk dipped in his flight and rose again. He seemed to nearly touch the ground. He *did* actually brush the short grass where the cock chaffinches were.

When he was vanishing among the low boughs of the tree that overhung the "ride," twisting in and out as he went. He had, it must be admitted, condescended to reduce speed slightly for this madness, but he was still moving fast enough to make one hold one's breath. He ought to have broken a limb, or his head, twenty times in half a dozen seconds, but he didn't. And this is a fact which explains the precise meaning and use of his short rounded wings, so different to the long pointed

other birds of prey, who hunt generally in the open.

In a bright open glade we find him on the ground, a minute later. He nearly always settled on the ground to eat his meals, and seemed to require both claws for the task then. The meal, too, was a protracted affair, for every little tiny sound of the woods—and there are numberless little tiny sounds in the woods—seemed to alarm him. A dozen times his head shot up to gaze at a rustle, or a whisper. Did a worm shift a leaf even, he must cease feeding to eye it. And one saw then what an amazing, highly-strung, nervous, excitable, straining, fretful temperament was the hawk's—quite a different character to that one would be led to expect after reading the average natural histories.

At last he straightened up for good. He had finished. Beneath him lay that little circle of plucked feathers which is the signet-mark, as it were, of his tribe, and when noted, is a sure proof to any whom it may concern that a sparrow-hawk has passed that way. He put down his head, and up one claw, to scratch his poll, cockatoo fashion, preparatory to taking wing, and—wh-r-r-hh!

It was like the arriving of a high-velocity shell—just a whistling, almost a singing, in the air, not straight down upon the hawk, but down on him in a sharp curve. Of course there was

not the slightest warning—there rarely is in the wild—just only that steely-blue bolt hurtling down—without saying a word.

It was another male sparrow-hawk.

Our sparrow-hawk did not look up. He would have been dead, his heart pierced in the terrible death-grip, the awful handshake, so to speak, of all the hawks. Perhaps he heard. If so, he must have had quicker ears than you or I, or he would have had no time else. Anyway, somehow he was lying on his back eight inches to one side of the spot where he had been standing. I say he *was* advisedly, because for the life of me I cannot make out how he got there in the time that he wasn't given.

What happened then is rather peculiar. I have said there is not much room for error in the sparrow-hawk's sensational down-curve, no more there is. It is more risky than the falcon's vertical swoop, because the latter puts on the brake at the last, and the hawk does not. He executes the whole performance at unchecked speed, and actually often brushes the earth at the lowest point of his curve. It is a question of wonderful judgment. But supposing something happens to upset the judgment, something be, or get, in the way that the hawk had not calculated upon? Just so! Things might happen, and—they did. Our hawk's little bit of magic appeared to represent

the uncalculated factor, and—well, as a matter of fact, I was wrong. Nothing *did* happen really. That was the awful part of it. Our hawk just continued to lie on his back, fairly bristling with claws and beak, and with a sort of “die in the last ditch” air, and the other hawk—continued to lie where he had landed; that is to say, on the precise spot where our hawk had been, and, by all the laws of explainable movement, ought to have been then. And that was the rub. The other hawk had *landed*. The fact of our hawk not being where he was, so to speak, had upset his judgment. The other hawk ought not to have landed. He realised the fact when he clutched our hawk, who was not there, and realised it too late. You cannot stop a living body travelling at somewhere about fifty miles an hour instantaneously without something giving way. In this case the second hawk’s life departed from him in the same instant that the thud of his body striking the ground sounded on the still air.

Then our hawk got up and departed also, and almost ran into the upright, rigid, moveless form of a female sparrowhawk sitting upon an out-jutting branch. She would have been taken as an altogether different species to our friend, because she was about two and a half inches longer, and coloured differently. But that is the way with hawks. The feath. ladies have got the vote all

right in hawk society, there can be no doubt about that, but—and here we can exchange a wink with ourselves—they do most of the fighting.

Whether that hen hawk had just arrived, whether she had witnessed the tragedy, or whether she had been there all along, I cannot say. It is quite evident, however, that her presence explained many things: the hot-headed attack of the other male sparrow-hawk among them. It also explains why our hawk did not go away from that wood, but is there to-day, his so strangely wooed mate with him. And, if Scarlet doesn't improve his shooting, there is good chance of his continuing to remain there, he and his wife, and their seed after them.

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ERY quietly through the grass something was creeping. You could tell this only by the waving of the grass-blades; otherwise, you would never have known that anything was there.

About twenty yards away, out in the field, far enough out to be safe from the rush of a stalking foe from the cover of the hedge, a rabbit was squatting—a hunched, fat, comfortable-looking, little, grey-brown figure in the afternoon sunshine. He had been there for half an hour, quite motionless.

And towards this rabbit the hidden creature in the long grass was slowly and surely stalking.

Once a wood-pigeon passed overhead, drawing attention to itself by the whirring of its wings, once a blackbird hopped out a little further down the hedge, and fanned his tail, then hopped in again as if vaguely alarmed, and once two shrew-mice in the ditch started fighting, and pricked the stillness with their sharp squeaks. Save for these things, however, the afternoon quiet was unbroken.

At length the waving grass-stems ceased to move. The stalker had got to within two yards

of the rabbit, and was apparently about to make its rush. This it would have to do because the long grass ceased here, and beyond that the stalker would have no cover.

It seemed as if all the wild was waiting for the expected rush. Everything was hushed as though in suspense. If there had been a watcher, he would have felt as if he wanted to warn the apparently unsuspecting rabbit of his hidden danger. But this is, of course, only how it impressed the human brain. No creature there in the wild really cared. It was purely the rabbit's affair.

Then, all of a sudden, the rabbit reversed its position. It was done so quickly and quietly that one scarcely noticed it. He did not move in any other way except to right-about-face. He sat on, hunched up as before, but his big eyes were bulging, as rabbits' eyes do; he was wide awake, at any rate.

Moreover, though the rabbit still sat as motionless as before, his nose was moving, was constantly on the "work"—just as you may have noticed that rabbits' noses nearly always are—and that meant that he was smelling hard. It also explained everything else. The hidden foe had made the blunder of approaching the rabbit down-wind. This, of course, no wild creature will do if it can be avoided, but in this case there was no cover to allow of an approach up-wind. This, we may presume, the

rabbit knew, and it was almost certainly the reason why he had turned his back to the wind, trusting to his nose to warn him of any danger from that quarter, and his eyes from danger in any other direction.

And, since there was no longer any need of concealment, the enemy stood up and came forth—a beady-eyed and sinister male stoat. He was really a very pretty little chap, neat and spruce as a dandy, looking anything but the professional slayer that he was.

He stood looking at the rabbit for a few moments, his keen head well up, poised on his long, snaky neck. And the rabbit sat on, hunched up, looking at him. Neither beast showed any trace of fear or excitement.

Then at last the stoat made his long-expected rush. But there was no real rush about it. It was quite slow—a leisurely, sidelong gallop. Anything would have no difficulty in avoiding it.

Now, you have heard, no doubt, many stories of rabbits being paralysed with fear when a stoat is hunting them, being, in fact, quite helpless. And it looked as if this rabbit must be under some such paralysis, for he did not move.

When the stoat was within two inches of the rabbit he stopped dead, and then, very quickly changing front, darted round behind bunny. This was the regular stoat manoeuvre

—to dart round to the side, or back, of the prey, and, leaping on to the back of the neck, deliver that single terrible bite of all the weasel tribe—to which the stoat belongs—at the soft cartilage at the base of the brain. Once an animal, no matter how big or how strong it may be, has received that bite, there is no longer any hope for it. Mind you, it may drop stone dead as if electrocuted; it may not move, though remaining alive, or it may run about in a zigzag, silly fashion, anywhere and anyhow, but, so far as its brain is concerned, it is dead. It is a wonderful stroke, and a scientific one. It gives to the weasel tribe a power quite out of all proportion to their strength, and it gives to them an insolent daring equally out of proportion to their size.

The next instant that stoat was lying kicking on his back, with all the wind knocked out of him, and the rabbit was quietly sitting, hunched up, facing him as before. It was the most surprising and unexpected defeat you ever saw. As the stoat ran round the rabbit, and reared to deliver the fatal bite, bunny had pivoted to meet him, and then, so quickly that unless you had been within a yard or two of them you could not have made out what had happened, jumped into the air, and landed a full-power kick with both of his long, powerful hind legs bang on the stoat's chest.

Now, a rabbit's hind legs are very long and

strong, and, like the kangaroo's, in a less degree a most effective weapon. Fortunately for their foes, however, rabbits do not appear to have found out what a useful weapon they possess. How this one found it out I cannot say exactly—probably in fighting some other buck-rabbit. Certain it is, however, the discovery, once made, was never forgotten, and our inoffensive and timid bunny became a foe to reckon with.

As for the stoat, he got up, gave this the first rabbit he had ever met that showed fight a prolonged stare, and, turning on his heel, slowly galloped away. He was no coward, that stoat; indeed, he was one of the pluckiest creatures that step the wild, but he was out to kill, and not to risk getting wounded in the process, since to be wounded might mean to starve. This latter fact, by the way, is probably the reason why most animals and birds of prey habitually prey upon creatures so much below their strength.

The rabbit sat on in the sunshine for some time longer—I have never been able to make sure if he really came there for the luxury of a sun-bath—and then, dropping his nose to the ground, began slowly to hop away. Rabbits must hop—they cannot walk because of the disproportion between their long hind legs and short fore ones.

He appeared to be following something by scent, picking out a trail slowly and at great

trouble, but the trail must have been pretty old, judging by the rate of his progress. In fifteen minutes, in and out and round about, he had most deliberately carried the trail on as many yards out into the field.

Several times he stopped to listen, as if more apprehensive even than rabbits usually are. He knew, of course, all the recognised danger-signals of the wild, and the clap of a rising wood-pigeon's wings, the "Tweit-tweit-tweit-tweit!" of a blackbird, the "Chuck it! chuck-chuck it!" of an old cock pheasant, or the drumming of a fellow-rabbit's feet on hollow tunnelled ground somewhere in the wood, each and all had the effect of turning him into a motionless image.

And at last he reached a hole. It was a rabbit-hole, indeed, but it was different from other rabbit-holes, in that it was stopped up, not with earth, but with grass. It was also different from most other rabbit-holes, in that it was smack in the open, and had only one entrance. It was out in the open thus partly because weasels and stoats don't like the open, and largely because *he* should not find it. And this was a very peculiar thing, too, seeing that the hole belonged to his wife, or one of his wives; and that the baby rabbits, which the fact that the hole was stopped up showed were inside, were *his* own baby rabbits. It must have been a very stuffy tenement, by the way.

These were not the only odd things about the business, either. His surreptitious actions, and the extraordinary care with which, by a multitude of sniffings, he assured himself that his wife was not inside, made one wonder what he might be "at." Murder was what he was "at"—murder, and worse. The slaying in cold blood of his own children was his game. I cannot tell you why, because I don't know. It's the way of a rabbit—that is all.

Carefully our rabbit pulled out the grass at the entrance to the hole, and put his head inside, and then—and then there came a little, quick, thudding sound on the short turf, growing louder and louder like a tiny drum, and our rabbit had the time of his life. He was bitten, he was scratched, he was pummelled, and kicked and butted and trampled on, he was pounded and punched and hammered till he didn't quite know whether he was on the earth or off it, and looked as though he had met a cyclone. As a matter of fact he hadn't. He had met his wife, and that appeared to have been much the same thing. No, a mother rabbit with young to defend is not at all inclined to follow the "honour and obey" creed, I can tell you. Of course the husband might have played his hind-leg stroke on his wife, but in the wild it isn't considered etiquette as a rule to strike a lady of your own kind back.

After that our rabbit went home to his own

nice dry high warren to recruit. He did not appear again all that night, so I suppose he was tired, which was not to be wondered at.

When he did appear it was late afternoon on the following day. Rushes of wind and rain had gone hissing and roaring through that wood above his domicile all day, and this was probably one reason why Mr. Cottontail had not appeared. Rabbits, you know, are quite helpless in the wet and forlornly miserable. Their coats are useless to keep out rain, and simply cling dankly to the blue skin almost as badly as thin wet wool.

Now, however, the setting sun had bathed the world in red-gold, the clouds had rolled back, the pheasants were crowing, the thrushes were shouting at the tops of their voices how fine a thing it was to be alive, and the black-birds were playing lazily on their mellow flutes for fun.

Our rabbit came out, and from then till the moon was well up fed on the clean, sweet young spring grass. Then he journeyed to a game-keeper's cottage garden and sampled some tender shoots of lettuce that would almost melt in your mouth, and was nearly himself sampled by one of the keeper's dogs, who scented him from afar.

From thence he sauntered to the nearest long herbage which afforded him a drink of raindrops, and then to the wood, where, like Roley Poley, "he would a-wooing go." His

method of doing this was simple and effective. He ran right round the covert, where his warren was, just inside the ring-fence, till he crossed the trail of a young lady rabbit, who had gone out to the open to feed. Then he followed up the trail, and—well, there you are, don't you know.

In this case, however, unfortunately another buck, bigger than himself, had done precisely the same thing a minute before him. And this gentleman at once hopped up to him insolently, grunting in a funny little way rabbits have, and spoiling for a fight. That is to say a fight rabbit fashion, which consists of boxing with the front paws, and for the life of me I cannot tell whether they ever do themselves much harm at it or not. And he got his fight—oh yes, all he wanted and a bit more. Our rabbit didn't play fair, however. He jumped up in the air and let out, not with his short, weak front paws, but his long, strong hind legs—bash! The other rabbit was knocked a distance of about one foot, and when he had got back his breath, he retired precipitantly into the moonlight. I think he wondered what on earth had happened.

When the moon sank our rabbit and his new wife went further abroad—rabbits move about more freely in the dark o' the moon than most people suspect, by the way—and

had trouble in consequence. Once a fox stalked them, and actually leapt clean over our rabbit in his efforts to get at the other, who fell backwards down a rabbit-hole just in time; once a young poaching cat sprang at them out of the blackness of a ditch, and, cornering the buck, received a full kick from his hind legs, given in pure terror, in one eye, and went away swearing shockingly; once, too, they were, in play, chasing two other rabbits, when the leading one directly in front of our rabbit stopped so absolutely instantaneously, that our bunny had to leap clean over him to avoid collision, and as he did so, he heard the other give that awful, pitiable squeal which rabbits utter when caught in a wire snare; and once, just before dawn, they ran into a weasel coming round a corner of a ditch, who, after delivering one charge and being knocked head over heels into the muddy water at bottom of the ditch for his pains, removed, bristling and scolding rudely.

Then, as day came stalking westwards over the woods, they returned to the warren in the covert to sleep.

I think they had been there about two hours, deep down under the twisted tree-roots, when the knocking came. It was a steady thudding from above, which echoed through the hollow, tunnelled ground like a drum in a cathedral.

Both rabbits were, of course—like all wild creatures—instantly awake and on their feet, ready for any emergency. For about twenty seconds they listened. Then our rabbit scratched one long ear with one hind paw, sat up, washed his face, and leisurely hopped out. The doe-rabbit snuggled down and went to sleep again. Evidently this thudding noise was a business which purely concerned her new husband.

As he hopped up along the tunnel, he could hear the joyous songs of blackbird, thrush, chaffinch, robin, and blackcap, the soft, sensuous cooing of wood-pigeons, the laughing of a woodpecker, the cawing of rooks, and all the noise and clatter of breezy day filtering down to him like little sounds of traffic in a street outside, as heard on a telephone. Then, without haste, he arrived at the mouth of the hole and peered out.

A full-grown, and indeed evidently an old, big buck-rabbit was sitting in front of the hole, thudding with his paws. As he watched, our rabbit beheld the old fellow move away to another hole and repeat the same manoeuvre, then to others, and finally come back again to our buck's hole. And bunny knew quite well what the visitor was doing. It is the custom for old buck-rabbits to go from hole to hole, and to thud on the ground in front of such holes as are occupied by a pair of rabbits, as a

direct challenge to the other male to come out and fight.

Now, as I have said before, rabbits fight, or box, rather, with their fore feet, and know no other way. Therefore, when our rabbit suddenly rushed out grunting—yes, rabbits grunt when angry—and, jumping in the air, kicked and sent the challenger spinning over and over, the other rabbit was so astounded that he seemed for an instant unable to move.

But the next instant both the rabbits moved sharp; both had gone, had darted into the nearest holes for their very life. Men appeared suddenly, coming along the edge of the wood.

As he crouched beside his wife down below, our rabbit could hear the thud of men's heavy feet drawing nearer, and finally stop outside. Followed a pause, then a frantic loud drumming of small feet, and a rabbit, with bulging eyes full of terror, came racing down the tunnel, scrambled round them, and tore on like a mad thing. More rabbits followed, to the number of eight—all fleeing as from twenty devils.

Then, clear and sharp on the morning air—but sounding strangely muffled from below—a shot rang out, another followed, and two more in quick succession. A rabbit, streaming with blood, passed them, dragging himself painfully up a side-tunnel. And then, cream-coloured, sharp-fanged, pink-eyed, there peered at them round the corner the grinning head of a ferret.

Instantly, like a startled horse, our rabbit's new wife bounded from his side and fled away up the burrow. He stood still, listening to the drumming of her small feet, growing fainter and fainter, till it died out altogether in the open air above. Then:

"Bang! Bang!"

The double discharge jarred through the length of the tunnel; there was a hollow, kicking sound, a nasty slithery noise, and his wife returned to him, sliding, and on her back. She brought up against him softly, and was still—horribly still. She was quite dead.

Rabbits' holes, you must know, are always constructed, or nearly always constructed, with a clean drop downwards from the mouth. This is in order that, no matter how badly wounded the owner may be, he has only to reach the mouth of his home, and his own weight will carry him down into safety, without any effort on his part. And this had happened to our rabbit's wife. Wounded to death by the guns of the ferreters outside, she had, in her last gasp, rolled over and over to the mouth of her hole, and slid down out of their reach, even as the life left her body.

As for our rabbit, I am sorry to say that he took not the least notice of the tragic domestic occurrence. He was, one supposes, too used to rabbits dying all about him from disease and misadventure to bother his head about one wife

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more or less. Moreover, he was just then too much occupied in preserving his own precious skin to be deeply affected at anything else.

The ferret took no notice either. He, also, was too used to seeing rabbits die—by the lancets of his own sharp canines preferably—to feel surprise at the apparition of this tobogganing corpse. He paused for a moment to deliberately look round the chamber, to measure his ground, as it were, and to sneeze in the odd way ferrets have, which, added to their pink eyes, gives them the appearance of eternally suffering from a bad cold in the head.

It *was* a chamber, be it noted, having either been hollowed out purposely by its inmates, or caved in by chance at a place where several tunnels met. It is important to emphasize this fact, because I doubt if our rabbit could have accomplished the feats that followed in the confined space of an ordinary rabbit-tunnel, and because it almost looked as if, with more gumption than one would generally give rabbits credit for, he deliberately chose his ground.

Anyway, be that as it may, the ferret came on, without hurry at first, until he was close up to the rabbit, and then, suddenly and astonishingly quickly, darted in and round to the back of the neck of his prey. Did he get there, though? No, sirs, he did not.

The rabbit sprang straight upwards, and in the darkness there was the sound of a sharp,

clean thud. The ferret hit the wall of the chamber with quite appreciable force, and picked himself up as quickly as might be, glaring, stupefied, through the darkness at the calmly hunched rabbit, and sneezing and chattering and bristling in a most furious fashion. He had got bunny's hind legs all right enough—a clean blow full on the face and the chest. So far as he was concerned, that rabbit could live on. He had had some, if I may so put it, and was not taking any more.

Just then, however, another actor appeared upon the scene. There was a sneeze, and a second pink-eyed, cream head appeared grinning round the corner of the tunnel—a very big, old dog-ferret this. Nevertheless, big as he was, he was handicapped in a way, because he was not forewarned—he did not know what to expect.

With the calm, plucky way ferrets have, this big, old dog-ferret sailed leisurely into battle, expecting no battle, of course. He got close, made his rush, and bunny went up in the air, and for the second time in that hot, stuffy place sounded the tell-tale “thwack” of Mr. Rabbit's forcetul hind legs. Ferret No. 2 was knocked flying.

Then those two ferrets went away, still chattering and swearing: went right away, went clean up to the open. And their masters could not make out what was the matter with them,

and why they were in such a vile temper. And, what is more, their masters cannot make out to this day why, whenever they "work" this particular warren, or "bury" as it is called, after a certain lapse of time, sometimes more, sometimes less, their ferrets, even up to the number of three, are sure to come out swearing like troopers, and looking as if they had met a live hammer.

I am glad to be able to tell you that, to the best of my knowledge, the "Fighting Rabbit" is still alive. At least, when I was shooting in that part of the world last, the same ferrets, after one brief look inside the warren, came out again, and refused to "work" the place at any price at all.

Note.—Since the facts above recorded are of a somewhat remarkable nature, it might be as well to state that, besides the rabbit in the story above, which came under personal observation, the author has lately received authentic records of at least two other "Fighting Rabbits," and it appears not improbable that the undoubted instances of rabbits seen apparently *playing* on quite friendly terms with stoats and cats, and of a hare doing the same with a dog, may be animals which have, by chance, discovered the powerful weapon they possess in their hind legs, and have learnt the trick of using the same.

THE USURPERS

"What rights are his that dares not strike for them?"



It was customary for every wild creature (and there were many in the valley) to cast an anxious eye in the direction of the cliffs at sunrise. This was no mere chance glance of a naturally timid creature, but a deliberate survey born of terrible experience. *There* lived the peregrine falcons, lords of the air, grandest of the wind-folk, whose empire was the realm of the racked eddies aloft. The wild-folk in the valley lay ever under the shadow of the peregrine's power, just as the valley itself lay under the shadow of the cliffs.

On the morning of which I write, joy ran riot over the valley. The heel of the conqueror had been lifted. For six days no peregrine had hurled from space above them; the terror had gone. Never had such a thing happened before; it was without precedent.

Suddenly, from coppice and field, furze-patch and rush-hampered stream, a hundred pairs of eyes, scanning the cliffs, started, focussed, and became fixed. A speck had

drifted into view, sailing the infinite void of blue above the cliff-brow. Impossible to guess the height of that speck. The news that a bird of prey (probably one of the great overlord peregrines themselves) swept aloft flashed through the valley like an invisible wave.

Suddenly the speck let itself down a matter of, perhaps, two hundred feet, and paused hanging in the wind like some great black kite. It was a kite, a living one, though the fork-tail, the waiting, slow, swinging flight, gave it away at its lower elevation. Then it dropped; not, indeed, thunderbolt fashion as a peregrine would, but still quick enough. The field-vole beneath had not seen it; that was because he was of the rodent tribe, who (for their sins, one presumes) seem scarcely gifted with the faculty to look upwards. He probably never saw the kite at all—never knew what had killed him, or from whence came the sudden blow which spelt oblivion. Then up rose the winged freebooter, swinging wonderfully, as only a kite can swing, through the air to a tree to dine.

About this time a second kite slid above the cliffs, screamed, and dived into the valley. Mate to the first, evidently. Her attraction below was a snipe, slipping along on shortened quick pinions from mud-hole to mud-hole, which snipe heard the sudden ominous hissing above.

No need to look—no time. Instantly it became a streak, a zigzagging something like brown forked lightning. A whirl as the kite shot swishing past, a scream of fierce, wild rage, and the hunter was backing off savagely: it had missed. It had all happened so suddenly, so instantaneously, so absolutely without warning, that a human eye would have been deceived by the confusion. As a matter of fact, the snipe had dropped like a stone into some rushes.

Five minutes later this second kite, sitting motionless on a gaunt, naked pine (a lightning-smitten pine) beheld something rufous, which showed for an instant among the heather and vanished. In a few seconds it appeared again—a fox, gaunt, clean-limbed, alert, belly flat to earth, creeping with something of the stealth, but none of the grace, of a cat. A fox on the trail of prey may be worth watching—from a kite's point of view. Again the beast merged itself into the heather, and was lost.

Suddenly there was a wild, panic-stricken rush of wings, and up out of the heather shot perhaps half a dozen grouse, for all the world like a bursting shell. Even as the last bird cleared the dark green sprays, the fox sprang after it, and the almost metallic snap of his jaws as he fell back foiled sounded quite sharply in that abode of vasty quietness.

The grouse, freed from the terror of "peregrine law," flung themselves whirling and whirring down-wind like a flight of bullets. They knew nothing about kites then. As they passed the stricken pine, the bird of prey lifted light as thistle-down from her perch, hung for a second as if on invisible wire, and fell. She arrived among the amazed grouse without any warning at all; yet they acted on the instant. They, too, precipitated themselves, literally pelting down, into the heather, where was safety; at least, all did save one, and that one never reached the heather. A rush, a scream, a heavy beating of scirritar pinions "backing air" furiously, a clutch, a soft blow, and the kite was winnowing slowly away with the luckless grouse held in its talons. All that remained (all proof of the murder) was the cloud of soft feathers still floating to the ground, feathers which but five seconds before were part of a living bird.

For the remaining hours of that long day the wild-folk of the valley did what business they had to do as secretly as possible. Apparently they had but exchanged the rule of one winged death for that of another. "Le Roi est mort—vive le Roi!" Even the big hares, the rooks, and the gulls moved circumspectly, not knowing how powerful the new overlords might prove.

It remained, however, for that bull-necked burglar the carrion-crow to show that these were no true royalty, after all, but only "usurpers." It happened this way: The carrion-crow was thinking about nesting. A robber and a bully at all times, he became something more when nesting was in vogue: he became a public danger. The tree selected was in a darksome oak-wood, flung, as it were, against the steep side of a hill; a wild spot, and lone—a fit abode for such cut-throats.

On the following morning both kites were discovered by the wild-folk floating on still wings above them in the infinite void. A grand sight thus to behold the two great birds hung suspended, as it were, against a background of regal sunrise, of dull, blue-grey cloud and flaming copper-red sky. A contrast in three colours, a study in silhouettes, a picture such as an artist might dream of, but no mortal could print. Then one of the kites slid earthwards, checked, swung, and swept over the oak-wood. She, too, held views upon nesting. Suddenly the sinister form of the crow detached itself from the oak-wood, wherein it was still dark, and heavily but swiftly rose to meet the kite. Here was no mastery of wing-power, only a steady, business-like beating the air. But he got along; there was evidence of speed.

The kite screamed shrilly in fierce surprise,

but the crow came on, ominous and forbidding. Harsh, metallic, quarrelsome "Cra-cra-crawl!" answered wild scream. Heavy, hammer-like beak met and turned the razor-edged talons.

For a moment the two birds appeared to grapple in mid-air. The black, burly head could be distinguished pounding steadily. Then the kite backed off. She had had enough. Mistress of the wing as she was, gifted by Nature with all the panoply of war, a slayer by birth and profession, yet she had no heart for a close-fought fight. She was put to rout ignominiously by a low-down, clumsy, rascally crow. Thus they parted. Neither was hurt, though both were ruffled.

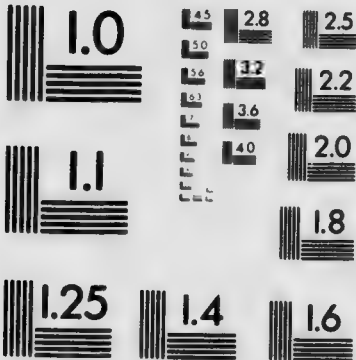
Yet the kite fell upon a partridge five minutes later with all the dash and fire of a full-blooded bird of prey. Here, at least, was no hesitation, no lack of spirit. But a herring gull sailing serenely past overhead laughed quietly to himself, as some gulls do, and it seemed as if there was derision in that laugh. Yesterday he was among those who manœuvred circumspectly; to-day he mocked openly; to-morrow—who could tell?

A few mornings after the events described above, a rook, passing over an oak hanger before the cliff where the peregrines had made their "erie" in the good old days, suddenly discovered that the kites were building a nest



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there. It was a bulky structure, visible almost all over the valley, a regular wheelbarrow-load of rubbish, and it grew like a great fungus.

In its way it was a remarkable nest. Daily almost some bird passing over would see one or other kite working at this new robber castle, would behold the rising sun glance again on the bronze upper plumage of the big bird's back, note the quick lifting of the buff, low-browed head, the gleam of the horn-coloured beak, and the fierce, suspicious, keen, and haughty stare of those stabbing eyes.

The kites evidently did not build nests after the fashion of other birds of prey, nor hunt in their manner either, for that matter. Nature and their fathers' fate had christened them robbers, and as robbers they raided, and their castle showed it. Upon the foundation of an old crow's nest in the main fork of a tall spruce-fir they piled sticks haphazard, it would seem, but, in reality, with great regard to strength and careful interlacing and unity of the whole. The cleverest builder of piers or girder-bridges never built, with all his mathematics, so cunningly as they. So far good. The great nest was a fine piece of skill, a veritable gale-defier, and fit place to cradle the offspring of the only birds who consistently and successfully could defy the storm-king.

But it was when it came to decoration that

the wild—put its hand over its mouth, so to speak. Surely, indeed, it was no idea of adding strength that induced the male bird to bring home wool and work it in, and if wool—not clean wool either—was excusable on the score of comfort, then paper and an old glove and a piece of rope—this was the female's offering—might be passed on the same score, though scarcely adding to the beauty of the edifice, especially as the paper was of an ancient and unclean type. But what are we to say of the head, neck, and feet of a gosling, which the male bird triumphantly shot all across the valley with in one stupendous, majestic, still-winged rush, guiding himself only by twists of the wonderful forked tail? This—phew!—was also built in, and then, if it please you, the female, apparently determined to reassert the rights of her superior size, must needs come in on the evening after with the skin of a rabbit, and build that into her home also. This was appalling, but, not to be outdone, the male bird successively returned and decorated his abode with portions of a fowl, a wood-pigeon, and the skin—the very old skin—of a lamb. This last, I fancy, did it. They appeared to have been satisfied at last, and so would you have been, more than satisfied, if you had had the temerity to climb up to that nest, and—forgot to hold your nose. It looked like one month's haul of a rag-and-

bone man, and a pretty rough and hardened old rag-and-bone man at that.

But let it not be supposed that during that time the wild-folk had any chance of forgetting that they were still under brigand law. These were the days of the terror, and of revolution, when, as generally happens, the weak suffered. Moreover, there was another point. Whatever of smallness there might be in the kites' characters, there could be no doubt about their mastery of the air. Nothing of the strength of the skies daunted them, no day was too bad for their hunting, no storm too furious for them to be abroad in. With the magic power which seemed to live in their cleft tails they defied the forces of the infinite with consummate and insolent daring. Even my lord peregrine had not laughed at the gale after this fashion.

You behold, upon a day when rain obscured the valleys in hissing sheets and the wind went shrieking across from peak to peak and down the gorges in terrifying rushes, the male kite working coolly along the mountain side, silent and unflustered in the teeth of it all. A twist of that cleft tail, and he shot down-wind full half a mile like a glancing meteor. Another twist, and he fetched up all standing, hanging, rocking gently on still wings—a suspended wonder 'twixt heaven and that up-heaved earth, the gale whistling through his curved horn-

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WARWICK
REYNOLDS

coloured beak and singing adown the strong feathers of his wonderful tail. Yet another twist, and he was going up-wind again, defiant and unhurried. From down in the oak-woods came the harsh "Cra-cra-craw!" of a footpad crow, a raven barked from the upper hill slope, and somewhere among the cliffs a continuous plaintive "S-i-e-u!" told of watching buzzards, but they all kept there; the gale was too much for *their* liking.

Then a pigeon, a blue and strong-winged wood-pigeon, let out from a beech-wood and flew with swift-beating wings across the valley, and the wind catching it, drifted it, with still desperately twinkling wings, adown the valley, as a launch, her propeller working at full speed, may be caught and whirled broadside on downstream.

Round went the buff head of the kite, for an instant that fierce, sheathed glance stabbed the space, and then, in a flash, with great scimitar pinions whistling like swords, he precipitated himself across the valley in pursuit.

After the sublime effortless periods of sailing, the sudden remorseless fury of this attack, so characteristic of the kite clan, came as almost a shock. It was so unexpected, so unlike what one might expect. And in a second or two the pigeon's quick eyes—almost the sharpest in our wild—saw. One knew that it saw, for it

turned, it canted, its wings began to fairly flicker, and like a drawn blue streak it vanished down the glen and the wind, fading as one looked to a speck, and from a speck to nothing. But behind it a second streak was drawn, a bronze one, swift and terrible, melting too on the eyeball as one watched amazed.

Then, after a minute, back they came again, the pigeon hugging the flank of the hill to escape the wind. It was chased now with a vengeance, turning, twisting this way and that, like a hunted rabbit in desperation, but always behind, right close behind, long, curved wings hissing as they worked, shot the kite, following every twist and turn with a ferocity and a fire that fairly took one's breath away. And then—and then, it was over.

There had come a flutter in mid-air, a pathetic, mad struggle against fate to keep working wings and lungs and heart that could not, though they break, do any more, and then the pigeon, half-falling, half-flying, dropping exhausted down, down, down to the bottom of the glen. And after it, sharp pinions half-closed, cleft tail aslant, hurtled the kite, shooting down on a grand slant, till the pair vanished among the bushes.

A moment later we find him perched on a gaunt and lightning-shattered oak—one of his favourite dining-tables, by the way—fiercely and

savagely plucking the limp and ruffled body of the pigeon held between his talons.

Then there was that other day, that other scene of sun and clear romping wind, blue sky, and cold, white scudding clouds, when the female kite, the hen bird, came, unflustered and calm as usual, wheeling, wheeling, wheeling over the shoulder of the hill, and, tacking all at once, glided for half a mile just above the sky-line along the crest, to stop and hang herself up in the heavens precisely over one of those trim little abodes of men, something cottage, something farm-house, that do delight to adorn those stupendous grim hillsides.

For perhaps as long as a man might take to draw two puffs at a cigarette she poised there, then, taking a half-circle, she dropped, it may be a hundred feet, and hung again. Then shut went the wings, and, silent and sinister, she fell.

It is as if one hears it, sees it all now: the clean, wind-washen, bright, chill spring morning; the spotless little house like a gigantic lump of chalk; the gold and laughter of the sun; the sudden cackle of a startled hen; the little scream and quick "To goodness! look you," of the scrupulous housewife, and the hen kite, a well-grown chicken kicking in her claws, beating upwards swiftly again, and away to a neighbouring hanger, where her fierce scream

awoke the echoes that lived in an old quarry, and the wild, soft "S-e-i-e-u-u!" of a hunting buzzard that announced her victory to the hill-side.

Thus, then, lived the kites in that valley, and gradually, under their rule, the wild-folk became rebellious and got out of hand—at least, all save the rats, partridges, and other small game. The crows and gulls became restless and showed signs of mutiny. Then came the Nemesis. Came he, or rather she, looking about the size of a butterfly high over the cliffs. Because it was a morning smitten alternately with storm and sunshine, none saw the coming of her during a rain-shower, save the grouse, who seem always to keep their "weather-eye" on the heavens throughout the waking hours. Yes; it was the peregrine returned at last: the hen bird, *the* "falcon," not the male or "tiercel," which is the smaller.

One kite was working the beat along the hill where the oak-wood was. Just now he was hidden by a rain-shower. His mate was away on another beat; for rarely did the pair hunt in consort. Then the rain passed, and revealed him sailing, sailing in wonderful circles on still wings. The falcon was winnowing swiftly across the valley at the time. Her piercing brown eyes, sweeping the depths below, made out the swinging kite. She saw, she checked

on upflung opinions, she paused, she aimed, and then—like a rigid steel wedge—she fell.

The grouse, crouching among the heather, beheld what appeared to be, as much as anything, a hissing meteor shoot athwart the sky. They noted that the kite, hearing what was coming, tried to rise suddenly at the last moment. They heard his shrill, wild scream quite clearly. Perhaps he thought his mate sought to surprise him with some playful t as it was just the nesting season.

A steel-coloured flash, a burst of feathers, a wild, hurtling feathered mass shooting earthwards at appalling speed, then—a division of the mass into two parts. The peregrine, wings threshing furiously, tail outspread, body thrown back, checking her mad career. The kite, blasted from life, a smashed and crumpled heap, turning over and over as it fell, and finally vanishing, crashing into the upper branches among the oaks.

An hour later the falcon, working over the valley with her usual travelling flight—a few grand strokes, then a drive forward—espied the hen kite returning home laden with booty. She was still afar off. Yet their eyes must have met across that three odd miles of space. The recognition was simultaneous, the result startling in its promptness.

To be exact, the kite removed. But that

conveys no idea of the picture, of the instant dropping of the booty—a dead rat—the sudden, frantic hissing of the great wings as the kite swung round into the wind, and the instant dwindling of that kite into the distance. If the retreat of the cleft-tailed freebooter was a marvel, the pursuit of the falcon was a miracle. The beat of her vast wings sounded like swords cleaving the air as she sprang into the gale and streaked after the foe.

What a wonderful exhibition of mastery of wing over wind! The empire of both birds was the air. They were both at the top of the tree among the great fliers; they differed only in method. Whereas the kite excelled in calm sailing in any wind, in slow play, in perfect ease without effort, the peregrine was a brilliant exponent of impetuous dash, of hurtling rushes, of lightning-flash dives—a symbol of speed. Smaller than the kite, the peregrine must have received its courage straight from Mars. It is, I think, without equal among the feathered folk.

Swiftly overhauled by the falcon, the kite changed her tactics. She sought the upper air, sought it in great spirals, till she was but a speck adrift in the vast arc of the heavens. Below, the sea glimmered through the clouds. But here, too, the peregrine excelled, was swifter, had gained the master-place—she was above.

In that position alone she could strike: no bird of prey strikes upwards—all attack downwards.

Down went the kite, as a stone might drop. It seemed as if by this act she had blundered fatally, had given the falcon what she wanted—namely, space to deliver her meteoric swoop. So confident was the peregrine that she “waited on” a few seconds before her wings closed and she hurled herself whistling after the kite. Suddenly, in mid-career, she screamed, she checked. Out shot the steel-blue wings; down dropped the fan-shaped tail—the brake was on, as it were. Foiled! Out-manœuvred in the moment of victory!

There, below, was the kite gliding away serenely, not four yards above the sliding heave of the waves, and there she was safe. No thunderbolt swoop could be delivered against her there—too great risk. It was more than risk—it was certain death, whether it be strike or miss. A peregrine, by reason of the appalling speed at which she delivers her attack, must have space below in which to pull up, otherwise she is powerless.

In five minutes the kite had merged into the horizon. Those wild-foik in the valley who looked up, beheld the peregrine enthroned, as it were, against the sky, motionless on her customary needle-like pinnacle of rock. Thus

the tiercel, her mate, found her haughtily regarding her own realm. The crows and gulls moved circumspectly again. There was no clamour among the jackdaws. The real monarchs had returned. The kites were but a memory, for :

“ When half-gods go,
The gods arrive.”

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